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Contemporary Philippine Drama: The Liveliest Voice

DOREEN G. FERNANDEZ

At this moment in Philippine historical time, representative forms of the whole history of Philippine drama may still be located and viewed. Among the non-Christian and Muslim ethnic groups may still be seen the rituals, verbal jousts, mimetic songs and dances that constituted indigenous, pre-Hispanic Philippine drama — based in and consolidating the community in which it grew. In Luzon, — for example, the Ilocos region and such Tagalog areas as Laguna and Bulacan — may still be found the *komedya*, *sinakulo*, *salubong*, *panunuluyan*, and others, that were the result of the Spaniards' introduction of staged drama and its use in the teaching of religion. At random fiestas or Rizal Day celebrations, one may still encounter *sarsuwelas* or *dramas* (prose plays), forms introduced in the late nineteenth century by professional or amateur Spanish theater groups, forms which flourished early in the American colonial era (one will recall that the drama was used by militant turn-of-the-century playwrights for what the American insular government called "sedition") and lasted till the 1920s, the heyday of professional *sarsuwela* troupes, actors and writers. Even a few sad remnants of vaudeville may be found, surviving in provincial fiestas, or sleazy strip joints, often near American bases.

Although some of these forms are revived, or updated, or referred to on the contemporary stage, current Philippine drama is definitely realistic in mode and temper.

This article is a revised version of a paper read at the Second International Philippine Studies Conference in Honolulu, Hawaii, 27-30 June 1981. All the plays mentioned in the text have been staged, and the year given is that of the first presentation, not of writing or of publication, unless so indicated. In this study, scripts and theater programs of plays presented between 1971 and 1981 were also consulted. Use was also made of a listing of all plays presented between 1972 and 1979, prepared for Dr. Bienvenido Lum-bera of the University of the Philippines.

How this came about in the light of an ancestry of ritual, komedya, sinakulo and sarsuwela, may be explained by the gap brought about by the introduction of the English language through the educational system in 1901. Education in English, added to the competition from film and vaudeville, both extremely effective purveyors of American culture, tolled the knell for traditional vernacular theater. Not only did the "modern," English-speaking audience demand theater in the new language; they also looked down on the *batalyas* of the komedya, the pat happy endings of the sarsuwela, the heavy emotion of the drama, and the often comic apocrypha of the sinakulo, calling these naive, fit only for children and *provincianos*, and definitely lacking in verisimilitude and the just-learned Western unities.

REALISM INTRODUCED

Drama became school-based (where else would English flourish and be viable?), studied in the classroom and performed in auditoriums. Since few plays were being written in English by Filipinos, directors turned to the repertoire of Anglo-American-European theater, and brought realistic drama onto the Philippine stage. From the thirties to the fifties, Manila theater fare consisted mainly of the Greek classics and Shakespeare at the Ateneo de Manila (played by all-male casts), the more "daring" modern dramas at the University of the Philippines (UP), and both types on various stages as brought by such groups as the Barangay players.

Eventually the gap was filled somewhat by the prolific Wilfrido Ma. Guerrero, the major Filipino playwright in English (with at least forty published plays and over a hundred written, most of them staged). Guerrero's work was authentic and proper to the times (the forties to the early sixties), because his language was the very language of the people he wrote about, the educated middle class, whose concerns were faithfully reflected in his plays. His was one of the few Filipino voices in an era of borrowed foreign plays, which gained sparse audiences composed mostly of literati, and of course, by virtue of both language and location, lost all the farmers, fishermen, housewives, workers, vendors, children, and old folk who in times past had crowded to komedyas and sarsuwelas.

Those were the years when directors like Lamberto Avellana mourned the lack of an audience, when critics were of the opinion that further education was necessary to create a theater-going public. Theater was moribund in the cities, the few performances attended mainly by the same few enthusiasts, and the families of the cast, brought in by loyalty, energetic ticket-selling and persuasion. Moreover, because the language was not native, few actors had the proper diction and intonation, and much of the audience's perception of the play was of the quality of the actors' English, and not of the core of the playwright's concern.

Bienvenido Lumbera has pointed out that, in these "moribund years of Philippine theater," when radio and television were added to the alternatives already offered by movies and vaudeville, dedicated directors and performers were not lacking, but playwrights were.¹ Nick Joaquin turned his formidable talents to drama at this time, and although *Portrait of the Artist as Filipino* (1951) is genuinely expressive of certain men in a particular moment and milieu, it led to no other plays then either by Joaquin or by others of similar persuasion or concern.

The tide turned for Philippine drama in the middle and late sixties because of two factors: (a) a discovery about language; and (b) the finding of subject matter that was not only proper, but indeed urgent.

THE RETURN TO THE VERNACULAR

Bienvenido Lumbera points out that the language problem was not new:

The question of language for Filipino theater had arisen much earlier, but it was viewed then as a technical problem. Given the deteriorating quality of spoken English among Filipino students, the number of potential actors who can be cast in plays was severely limited by considerations of diction and intonation. When the intelligentsia in colleges and universities began to interpret, in terms of their social outlook, the nationalist ideas of Recto, they formulated these ideas as a "search for national identity." The language problem of theater people then took on a cultural

1. Bienvenido Lumbera, "Philippine Theater since 1972," (unpublished manuscript, 1979), pp. 1-5, *passim*.

dimension — where is Filipino theater when its content and its medium were of foreign origin?²

The directors found that their education—and that of their actors and audience—had given them a familiarity with Western theater, had provided tools and techniques for staging and training, but had also cut them off from pre-English traditional Philippine drama. Few of them, in fact, knew that this even existed.

The instinctive reaction to the realization that English was probably the wrong language for Philippine theater was manifested in two ways: translation and adaptation. Rolando Tinio translated Western drama into Pilipino: Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* ("Laruang Kristal"), and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* ("Pahimakas ng Isang Ahente"), the latter with electrifying effect on the audience. This had of course been done during the Japanese occupation, when translations of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *Private Lives* and others had been staged to satisfy the Shimbunsha rule against English on stage, but Dramatic Philippines and the Philippine Artists League had returned to English as soon as the war was over.

In 1964, Onofre Pagsanghan, trained in Western theater at the Ateneo, adapted Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* into *Doon Po Sa Amin*, transmuting Grover's Corners into Barrio San Roque, and Filipinizing not only the language but the American small-town experience. The play found and still finds appreciative audiences.

Translation and adaptation put the vernacular back on stage, gave it a new respectability in the eyes of the English-educated, and earned theater some new audiences. (*Doon Po Sa Amin* was first staged in Balic-Balic, Sampaloc.)

THE NEW MATTER

The pressures of history and society gave Philippine vernacular drama new content — immediate, relevant, and realistic in temper — and brought about what could truly be called contemporary Philippine drama. B. Lumbera traces this development thus:

In the 1960's, there was some kind of political dawning that had its impact on the cultural scene. Held suspect under the Cold War climate of

2. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

the previous decade, nationalism was beginning to re-assert itself in college and university campuses as a delayed effect of the late Claro M. Recto's ideas as fiscalizer during the administration of Ramon Magsaysay. Early during the regime of Diosdado Macapagal, import control as a measure designed to shore up a wobbly national economy was lifted under pressure from U.S. economic interests in the Philippines. The immediate result was the devaluation of the peso which brought with it hard times for the masses.

The nationalist movement was well underway by the mid-60's, and the emergence of youth activism in colleges and universities served notice that the temper of a sector of the urban population was no longer content to wait for social change to come. From the campuses, young people fired by hopes that they could change society fanned out to communities to imbue the masses with their ideas for change.³

The nationalism and student activism of the sixties and early seventies determined quite definitely the matter of drama of the period. Groups like the Kamanyang Players, Kalinangang Anak-Pawis, Panday-Sining, Gintong Silahis, and Tanghalang Bayan wrote, directed, and acted out plays focusing directly on national problems (*Tunggalian*, *Huwelga*, etc.). These analyzed the problems caused by unjust social structures, feudalism, corruption, imperialism, and the like, and brought performances out of theaters to public plazas, community playgrounds, market places, streets, factories, the steps of the Cultural Center, and wherever else people congregated. Drama searched out its audience, and spoke to them directly, in theater styles learned from Piscator, Brecht, and Chinese political theater.

Off the streets and in the theaters, the temper was changing too. The Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA), which had been established in 1967 "to promote and guide the growth and development of theater arts in the Philippines" and act as "coordinating agency for a national association of drama groups,"⁴ had as its first presentation Virginia Moreno's *Straw Patriot* (1956) – in Pilipino translation by Wilfredo P. Sanchez, 1967 – a play on agrarian problems and revolution. PETA went on to do translations and adaptations of foreign plays (Brecht, Dürrenmatt, Ionesco, etc.); *Larawan*, Nick Joaquin's *Portrait* in

3. Ibid., pp. 2-3.

4. Nicanor Tiongson, "PETA and BABAYLAN: Two Steps Down from the Ivory Tower of Miseducation," *Manila Paper* 1 (February 1975), p. 8.

Pilipino translation; and notably, in 1971, Isagani Cruz's modern sarsuwela *Halimaw* (about tyrannical rule, conflicting ideologies, and social problems in the Philippines of the seventies); as well as Marilou Jacob and Franklin Osorio's *Ai Dao* (about the Muslim struggle in the South).

Dulaang Sibol, the Ateneo de Manila High School drama group had, under the guidance of Onofre Pagsanghan, moved away from English and – amazing in the school considered the bastion of written and spoken English – had young playwrights writing original plays in Pilipino, in a style that has been called “poetic realism.” In the sixties, two major talents had already emerged: one of them, Paul Dumol, whose *Paglilitis ni Mang Serapio* (1968) (one of the most often performed one-act plays in current dramatic literature), *Putting Timamanukin* (1968), and existentialist *Pagkaawit ng Adarna* eventually led to *Kabesang Tales* (1975), a major work, skillfully crafted on the Brechtian model, in which the Tales story from Rizal's *El Filibusterismo* generated forceful insights into injustice, social structure, and the limits of man's endurance. Tony Perez, on the other hand, in works like *Hoy Boyet*, *Sierra Lakes*, *Gabun*, *Alex Antiporda*, and *Anak ng Araw* showed that his concern lay in studying the psychology, traumas and hang-ups of a particular social class. A later work, *Si Lucas sa Lalawigan, si Lucio sa Lunsod* (1976), experimental in form, was concerned with primitivism and liberation; and the prize-winning *Bombita* (1981) has veered towards comedy and satirical social comment.

Even the Palanca Awards, the winners of which have been called by playwright Alberto Florentino “filing cabinet drama” because they were written for the contest and hardly ever reached the stage, had brought forth Rogelio Sikat's *Moses, Moses* (1968) about politicians and corruption and the inavailability of justice to the powerless, and Wilfrido Virtusio's *Vida* (1969) which juxtaposed in a prison situation the injustices in rural and urban Philippine settings.

Clearly, the times were shaping the drama, and the nationalism and activism of the sixties and seventies sharpened and focused intent, techniques, temper, and purpose that had been in slow development before then. Theater was no mere exercise or entertainment but a voice speaking with urgency.

The declaration of Martial Law in 1972 lowered the curtain on the direct protest of the proletarian plays, and for a while had playwrights and directors "testing the waters" to see what theater was possible in the new regime.⁵ In the first years of Martial Law, all scripts had to be approved and performances given permits by the Office of Civil Defense and Relations. In 1973, PETA staged *Itay, Kain na Tayo*, a play on family planning commissioned by the National Media Production Center; a translation of Yeats' *Calvary*; *Addongon*, stage version of Amador Daguio's short story *Wedding Dance*; a Pilipino translation of Jose Rizal's *Junto al Pasig* (1880); and one-act plays based on or translated from Filipino and foreign folk tales, short stories, and plays. The Samahan sa Dulo, composed mostly of Dulaang Sibol alumni, produced Dumol and Perez plays at the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) End Room; *Gayuma*, a rock musical on *manghuhula* by Mol Fernando; and Rolando Tinio's now much performed *May Katuwiran ang Katuwiran* which, in the manner of Brecht's "learning play," explores "with ironic wit the dialectics of oppression and injustice" through the interaction between a *kasama* (peasant) and a fleeing landlord.⁶

By the early seventies it was obvious that, even though playwrights and theater groups showed a certain cautiousness in the choice and handling of dramatic material, the temper was definitely realistic, far removed from the romanticism of komedya and sarsuwela, and quite definitely focused on the Philippines here and now. This was a realism that had not evolved naturally from traditional Philippine theater, which had been truncated in development by the introduction of English. It was a learned realism

. . . introduced into the stream of Philippine theater by the American educational system, and therefore . . . [following] two tendencies: the psychological, which focused on problems of individuals; and the social, which situates and roots individual problems within the wider framework of a class society.⁷

5. In 1972, after the declaration of Martial Law, only three plays were staged: the rock opera *Tommy*, *Westside Story in Rock* (both in November), and Fr. James B. Reuter, S.J.'s *Gift of Love* (December), all at the Cultural Center of the Philippines.

6. Lumbera, "Theater since 1972," pp. 29-30.

7. Nicanor Tiongson, "Towards Our Own National Theater," *The Review* 4 (February 1981): 44. See also this author's "Ang Dulaang Pilipino," in *Panitikan at Kritismo*, Rosario Torres-Yu, ed (Manila: National Book Store, 1980), 1:138-59.

It was also a realism given urgency by the pressure of historical event and contemporary problems.

By 1975, playwrights and directors had found their bearings, and had marshalled methods by which the nationalist consciousness and the confrontation of social problems could be expressed onstage without being branded "subversive," and thus inviting censorship and detention.

HISTORY AS PRESENT

The first method was to use historical material, letting it speak about past events, while suggesting to fertile minds in the audience possible analogies or parallels in the present or even the future. Fernando Josef's *Ang Tao . . . Hayop o Tao* (1975) is about the Dagohoy revolt in Bohol in 1744, which lasted for eighty-five years. The Spanish friar who commits injustice is the weak-willed *tao* "spoiled by territorial instinct." Dagohoy, the victim, turns *hayop* because of oppression, and the play aims to show that "man's being more TAO than HAYOP or vice-versa depends primarily on the kind of existence he has to contend with."⁸

Al Santos' *Mayo A-Beinte Uno atbp Kabanata* (1977) deals in documentary fashion (using slides and hard data) with the story of Lapiang Malaya founder and leader Valentin de los Santos. Members of this messianic peasant organization were massacred in 1966 by the military, and de los Santos was adjudged insane, then placed in an asylum where he was later murdered by another inmate. The playwright, "in developmental analysis, touches upon the root of such organizations as Lapiang Malaya," and thereby "traces the origins of the peasants' need for land in feudal exploitation by the Church in Spanish times and imperialist depredation by American business in the twentieth century." It is, above all, B. Lumbera feels,

. . . a lament over the lot of the oppressed who are forced to turn to quasi-religious superstition in their search for liberation. Because Santos has dressed up his play in highly sophisticated stagecraft, the protest embodied

8. Fernando Josef, "Directorial Notes," *Ang Tao . . . Hayop o Tao* Theater Program, PETA, November 1975.

in his play has found a safe cosmopolitan shell that insulates the play against possible charges of being a species of agit-prop.⁹

An earlier play by Santos on the same subject, *Si Tatang atbp. mga Tauhan ng Aming Dula* (1975), focuses on Valentin de los Santos' last hours in the mental hospital, and then rebuilds his life story through improvisations and pantomime. The intention of the play is suggested in Lito Tiongson's directorial notes: "Tatang is Valentin de los Santos. Tatang is Hermano Pule, Papa Isio, Apo Ipe. Tatang is anyone of the Pulahanes of Leyte, Dios-Dios of Samar, etc. Tatang therefore is the symbolic embodiment of all . . . [these] people. . . . From Hermano Pule of 1840 to Valentin de los Santos of 1967 we trace a thread that binds them together."¹⁰

Domingo Landicho's *Unang Alay* (1975) is about Gregoria de Jesus and Andres Bonifacio's "first offering" to the revolution: their child, and thus personal concern for national need. This was eventually followed by two other plays relating to Bonifacio, *Sa Bagwis ng Sigwa*, on the discovery of the Katipunan and *Dapit-hapon* (1977), on the killing of Bonifacio, to make a trilogy (published 1978) on the founder of the Katipunan.

Also on Bonifacio have been Bonifacio Ilagan's *Katipunan: Mga Anak ng Bayan* (1978), revised and retitled *Sigaw ng Bayan* when staged at UP; and his *Langit Ma'y Magdilim* (1979), which focuses on the first phase of the Philippine revolution, from Pugadlawin to Biyak-na-bato and the surrender of Aguinaldo's army, after which Emilio Jacinto, Sakay, and other "anak ng bayan" nurtured "ang binhi ng rebolusyong ipinunla ng Supremo."¹¹ Still on the hero are *Andres Bonifacio, Ang Dakilang Anak-pawis* (1979), an opera with libretto by Roger Mangahas and music by Jerry Dadap; and *Ambon sa Madaling Araw* (1979) by Jose Dalisay, Jr.

It is easy to see why the life of "the great plebeian," the development of his consciousness as revolutionary, the founding and

9. Bienvenido Lumbera, "The Nationalist Struggle and the Filipino Writer," *Cultural Research Bulletin* 2 (January-March 1981): 20.

10. Lito Tiongson, "Director's Diary," *Si Tatang atbp. Mga Tauhan ng Aming Dula*, Theater Program, PETA, October 1975.

11. "The seed of the revolution planted by the Supremo." Bonifacio Ilagan, "Buod ng Dula," *Langit Ma'y Magdilim* Theater Program, U.P. Repertory Company, September 1979.

growth of the Katipunan, and Bonifacio's part in the revolution should be an appealing area of exploration for many playwrights. There is not only an innate drama in the events, but also material for reflection about and reaction to oppression and the means of ending it.

Conrado de Quiros' 1898: *Sa Mata ng Daluyong* (1981) is largely expository, concentrating on the events of June and December 1898 when General Emilio Aguinaldo, president of the young Philippine Republic, was torn between the diametrically opposed perceptions of American intentions of Apolinario Mabini and the *ilustrados* led by Pedro Paterno. The advice he chose to take decided history. The narrow focus elicited favorable audience reaction, since it gave clear insights into the actual beginning of American colonization.

An imaginative and effective use of history is Lito Tiongson's *Ang Walang Kamatayang Buhay ni Juan de la Cruz Alyas . . .* (1976). With the Philippine-American war as background, the play shows the invincibility of Juan de la Cruz who, as street sweeper, servant, peasant farmer, revolutionary general, man on the street, survives "the American imposition of martial law, curfew, zoning, reconcentration, and torture"¹² and, it is suggested, any other present or future analogous events.

Other plays have explored peasant movements (*Ang Unang Pagtatanghal ng "Ang Huling Pasyon ni Hermano Pule,"* by Rosauro de la Cruz, 1975); the founding of a Filipino religious order for nuns in the seventeenth century, against much opposition from the church (*Beatas*, by Nick Joaquin, 1978); heroism during the Japanese occupation (*Sugatang Lawin* by Jose Dalisay, Jr., 1978); the lives of Josephine Bracken (by Isagani Cruz, 1978) Juan Luna (by Bienvenido Noriega, 1981); Gregorio Aglipay (by Alfredo Salanga, 1982); and characters and situations from the novels of Rizal which, though fiction, are taken practically as history by many Filipinos (Paul Dumol's *Kabesang Tales*, 1975; Rosauro de la Cruz's *Mga Misteryo ng Hapis ni Sisa*, 1975; *Ang Paglalakbay ni Sisa*, 1976, written by Amelia Lapeña Bonifacio in Noh Drama style; *Kanser*, by Jomar Fleras, 1980).

Certainly one of the plays that reached farthest back into the Philippine past was PETA's landmark *May-i, May-i* (1979), written

12. Tiongson, "National Theater," p. 45.

by Al Santos and Marilou Jacob, based on a synopsis prepared by the late Emmanuel Lacaba between 1971 and 1973 for a planned trilogy. The play posits a tradition of resistance to oppression even before the coming of the Spaniards. It explores a conflict between a native community led by Panday Pira that functions through communal work and sharing, and a feudal community with classes and slaves, led by Raha Matanda and Lakandula. The conflict explodes in both ideology and love between the young Raha Sulayman and Magat Salamat, who later unite against the invading Spaniards, and against the old rulers, who had earlier entered into a blood compact with the invaders. PETA not only brought to life a relatively dim portion of history, but searched for body movements (from mime, dance, martial arts), ritual and language to constitute a theatrical idiom able to convey the feel, the character of an untouched, pre-Hispanic Philippine world.

In the hands of the contemporary playwright, history is eloquent, and not only about the past.

DRAMA AS SOCIAL DOCUMENTATION

The majority of contemporary Philippine plays have found a rich lode of material in current social reality, in various rural and urban situations, in the incontrovertible facts of poverty, in the types and phases of exploitation, in the hard data offered by newspaper reports, government statistics, social work surveys, and economic analyses — since all wear human faces and beat with human emotions. Here the playwright has felt it “safe” to venture, for who can argue with hard fact?

Several young playwrights have made this their special area of exploration. Reuel Aguila, whose first play, *Anak ni Bonifacio* (1975) was about a young writer's growing commitment to the struggle of a community of urban poor against a landowner who covets the lands on which they live, went on to write *In Dis Korner* (1978), about the disillusionment of a rising young boxer, who learns about fight-fixing when he is told to lose. In the boxer's hopeless bucking of the system, Aguila has written a “lament for and a tribute to the downtrodden who learn to rise up in defiance of their oppressors.”¹³ His *Mapait na Bao* (1980)

13. Lumbera, “Theater since 1972,” p. 33.

is on workers in coconut plantations, dirt-poor and debt-weary, exploited even by the agencies that promise them hope through jobs in "Saudi." In a recent magazine article, Aguila writes wryly about present-day society, and what it implicitly asks of the writer:

Hindi maglalaon ay magkakaroon ng pabagu-bagong batas, engkuwentro sa gayon at ganitong lugar, at nakawan sa tabi-tabi. Simbilis ng pagtitimpla ng *instant coffee* ang pagsulpot ng mga gusali at kalye. Ilang ulit na magtataas ng presyo ng gasolina, pamasaha at pagpapamasaha. Maglaladlad ng kapa ang mga bakla at isang umaga'y magigising ang Pilipino na wala na ang batas militar.

Hilong-talilong ang manunulat na nagnanais magpakita ng ganitong kabuuan sa kanyang akda. Kaya kadalasan, mas nagiging pang-aliw na lamang ang panitikan at *mass media*.

Relax and enjoy, see a movie, sabi ng *ads* sa sine. May *live radio coverage* ang libing ni Ben Tumbling. Nabulag si Flor de Luna, ngunit nakakakita na ngayon. Makikipaghampasan ng suso ang isang artista, ayon sa tsis-mis ng isang kolumnista ng isang magasin. May operang gaganapin at dadaluhan ito ng mga taas-kilay ng lipunan. *Sold-out* ang hindi maintindihang painting ng isang hindi rin maintindihang pintor. Laos na si Freddie Aguilar. Sikat si Yoyoy. May *ballet* mamaya samantalang malakas ang kita ng mga *ago-go* dancers sa Ermita. Magkaaway pa rin sina F. Sionil Jose at si Adrian Cristobal. *Deadline* na naman sa Palanca. Muling igigiit ng pangasiwaan na walang manunulat na nakakulong.

At ang nagbabagong panahon ay humihingi ng tugon mula sa iba't ibang uri ng sining.¹⁴

(In not much time we will have new and changing laws, encounters in this or that place, thefts around the corner. Buildings and streets emerge as fast as one makes a cup of instant coffee. Prices of gasoline, transportation, and massages will rise several times over. Gays will come out of the closet, and one morning the Filipino will wake up with martial law gone.

Bewildered, would be the writer wishing to show all this, whole, in his work. This is why most times, literature and mass media become mere entertainment.

Relax and enjoy, see a movie, say the movie ads. The funeral of Ben Tumbling enjoys live radio coverage. Flor de Luna went blind, but can now see again. An actress engaged in a breast-baring fight, according to a movie columnist's gossip. An opera will be staged, to be attended by society high-brows. The incomprehensible paintings of an incomprehensible writer have sold out. Freddie Aguilar is out; Yoyoy is in. There's a

14. Reuel M. Aguila, "Ang Pag-unlad ng Dulang Pilipino," *Observer*, 16 June 1981, p. 36.



Left: "Ambon sa Madaling Araw" by Jose Dalisay, Jr., with Johnny Delgado as Andres Bonifacio and Charo Santos as his wife; below: "Daluyong" by Conrad de Quiroz, with Bonifacio Ilagan as Apolinario Mabini and Ariosto Reyes as Emilio Aguinaldo.





Top: "Hiblang Abo" by Rene Villanueva, with Bruno Punzalan and Venchito Galvez; ***bottom:*** "Katulad ni Itay" by Rody Vera, with Joel Lamangan as the Union organizer.

ballet on tonight, but the ago-go dancers in Ermita make money. F. Sionil Jose and Adrian Cristobal are still at odds. It's deadline time for the Palanca awards again. The administration will again emphasize that there is no writer in detention.

And the changing times demand a response from the various arts.)

Nonilon Queaño's *Alipato* (1975) is a gripping picture of a slum community of drunks, prostitutes, small-time racketeers, thieves, waitresses, laundrywomen, etc., who help each other survive among the men and institutions that threaten their humanity and very existence. His *Ang Magsasaka* (1978) is a grim portrayal of poverty and oppression in the barrio where, he suggests, change can only come from the young who learn to ask questions and fight back.

Rene Villanueva's *Entresuwelo* (1978) looks into the different doors of a cheap apartment row, offering a montage of the lives of the urban poor who eke out a life doing laundry, going from job to job, sitting around *sari-sari* stores, walking the streets. *Burles* (1978) takes the audience to a seamy burlesque theater and to the seamier exploitation — financial and sexual — backstage. His memorable *Hiblang Abo* (1980) enters a home for the aged, where four old men's interlocking fates unlock stories of struggle, oppression, loneliness, illusion, and poverty that differ and yet merge into a single picture.

One of the most successful plays in recent years — packing audiences in night after night mainly by word-of-mouth publicity, without big names as attraction — was *Juan Tamban* (1978). Mari-lou Jacob took off from a newspaper account of a boy found by social workers, ill from eating cockroaches and lizards. The inquiry resulted in a play in which poverty in a slum community of scavengers and petty thieves is juxtaposed against the attitudes of government agencies, doctors, the middle and upper classes, and especially one social worker who takes Juan Tamban as "case" and as thesis subject — and changes radically in the process. Expressionism was used with special effectivity, as a chorus narrated, commented, and played various roles to link together the very real and moving episodes.

Manuel Pambid's *Buhay Batilyo, Hindi Kami Susuko* (1975) is about the *batilyos*, the casual workers who carry the metal basins of fish from the boats or barges to the selling/bidding area and

who, to keep their unstable jobs, are victims of various types of exploitation at the whim of the fishing magnates and their wives. Mauro Avena's *Sakada* (1975) looks into the migrant worker in the Negros sugar haciendas, hired only for the milling season to cut and load sugarcane, and who is generally ill fed, ill housed, underpaid, and victimized by the labor contractor who brought him over from his native Antique or Cebu. Dong de los Reyes' *Daungan . . . Laot . . . Daungan* (1980) uses authentic language and traditional beliefs to limn the struggle of fishermen to fish a living out of a lake slowly being encroached upon by the fishtraps, the greed, and the gunmen of a rich man, against whom the powerless and the inarticulate eventually fight back. *Peryante* (1977) by Joey Papa zeroes in on the barely-noticed, small-time itinerant *perya*, where the various "acts" or concessionaires — the female impersonator, the "spider girl," the gamester, etc. — reveal the unfunny underside of injustice from the contractor who books them from barrio to barrio. Al Santos' rock opera, *Sa Bundok ng Apo* (1978, music by Jose Ayala, Jr.), has a Bagobo tribe defending its ancestral lands against land-grabbing lowlanders. *Halik sa Kampilan* (1978) was adapted by Frank Rivera for Sining Kambayoka into a fiery exposé of the many-sided Muslim problem in the south. *Panahon ni Cristy* (1979), written by Edgar Maranan while in detention, is a close, chilling look into the separate incarcerations of a poor fisherman and his wife, and their helplessness, desperation, and eventual madness. Nic Cleto's *Higaang Marmol* (1976) is about ousted squatters, supposedly "relocated," but who end up spending nights on the "marble beds" of a cemetery. Aida Carmona's *Mr. Prudente Servicio, Retirado* (1980) has a retired school teacher's dreams shatter when bureaucracy and corruption deny him his rightful pension. Tony Perez's *Bombita* (1981), an hilarious standout among the few comedies currently being written, pulls its punches, but hits at the absurdity of blind obedience and military missions. Marilou Jacob's *Peti-burges* (1982) considers the causes and meaning of student activism and its effects on person and family. Even Al Santos' wildly funny *Ang Sistema ni Tuko* (1980) about a schoolteacher with impossibly mischievous students who make fun of his syllabus and methods, unchanged in a score of years, comments on the educational system. Mr. Tuko's teaching is irrelevant and out of date,

because he is so poorly paid that he moonlights as a waiter in Cubao.

The much-performed *Paraisong Parisukat* (1974) by Orlando Nadres, popular for study because of its craftsmanship and construction, has as its main character Simplicia, shoe store employee, denizen of the little "square paradise" from which shoes of specified sizes and colors are hurled down a chute towards the sales floor. Her simple paradise is shattered by the serpent of knowledge when she realizes her exploitation, the absence of alternatives for her, and the prospect of a future of monotonous desperation.

This many-pronged inquiry by the Filipino playwright into the unswept corners of Philippine society has spawned a new theater form, suited to the purpose and the poverty of Philippine theater. Called the *dula-tula*, all it calls for are three actors: a narrator, a principal actor, and a "common man" who plays all the other roles with a minimum of props and costumes. This started with the UP Repertory Company's dramatization in 1975 of Jose Lacaba's poem, "Ang mga Kagilagilalas na Pakikipagsapalaran ni Juan de la Cruz" (written in 1971). Juan de la Cruz, empty of pocket, runs up against all manner of social and official institutions and finally, in desperation, takes off for the mountains — and the student activists are blamed "kung bakit sinulsulan/ ang isang tahi-mik na mamamayan/ na tulad ni Juan de la Cruz." In 1976 Rizalina Valencia wrote *Iskolar ng Bayan* which, staged in the same manner, humorously dissected local and national issues and the question of academic freedom for wildly applauding UP students and faculty. In 1977 Valencia confirmed the viability of the form with the prize-winning *Juan Obrero*, which now took up the workingman's plight — no training, no opportunities, social strictures, injustice from top and middle men, etc.

Bienvenido Noriega's excellent *Bayan-Bayanan* (1975), although set in a foreign land, explores the many motives and problems of the expatriate Filipino, trying to find home, community, and meaning where there is none. It is also Noriega who, in *Ramona Reyes sa Forbes Park* (1975), ventures into the hitherto uncharted territory of the household help in foreigners' homes — torn between dreams of plenty in a foreign land and relationships and reality back home, and looking forward to a future that may well hold neither.

Orlando Nadres' oft-performed, first-of-a-kind *Hanggang Dito na Lamang at Maraming Salamat* (1975) is an authentic and realistic portrayal of the male homosexual, contrasting the stereotype, giggling *manicurista* in drag, and the dignified and discreet small businessman, each taken as a human being shaped by environment and circumstance. Tony Perez's *Alex Antiporda* (1974) takes a basketball star through a philosophy oral exam and into a realization of his existential loneliness. These two plays represent the minority vein — psychological realism — but both fathom the deeps and shoals of particular segments of Philippine society.

The range of richness of subject matter to be had from a thoughtful exploration of Philippine social reality indicates clearly the reason why this is an area of major concern for contemporary playwrights. Ivory towers and intricately individual problems of alienation seem less important, even self-indulgent, when surrounding reality asserts its immediacy so insistently on the conscience and consciousness of the writer.

FOLKLORE AS LANGUAGE

In a society still rooted in and not far removed from traditional and oral literature, the playwright has found folklore an appealing and effective vehicle for ideas. Nicanor Tiongson considers Rodolfo Galenzoga's *Maranatha* (1974), staged by the Kolambugan Dance Theater which he founded and directed, "one of the most powerful plays of the decade":

. . . *Maranatha* contemporizes an old Lanao legend about a stranger that saved the people of that lake kingdom from a predatory black bird, and the slippers he threw into the lake before his departure which according to him were the only things that could save the people from the oppression of military forces that would plague the kingdom after his departure.¹⁵

The "lake" into which the slippers are thrown is the audience, and their "finding the slippers" themselves would mean their liberation.

Bernardo Carpio, a Spanish romance that, indigenized into an *awit*, gave the Filipino a folk hero of prodigious strength, whose

15. Tiongson, "National Theater," p. 45.

escape from between two rocks crushing in upon him would mean freedom for the Filipino people, was turned into a musical by Virgilio Almario and Tito Climaco (1976) that wedded rock music and social comment.

The imaginative use of folklore to create what amounts to a new theater form is seen in the work of Frank Rivera and Sining Kambayoka, in which tales about the rogue-hero, Pilandok, are woven into the still-evolving *Mga Kuwentong Maranaw* (1974) which makes humorous and pithy comments on power and its use, on men and women, on folkways and lifestyles. Use of the Muslim *bayok* jousting, the Visayan *balak*, and the Tagalog *balagtasan*, as well as the *malong* as stage device has achieved a distinctive, native Kambayoka style. The group has also staged the epic, *Maharadia Lawana* (1977).

Tales of the Manuvu (1977) was a hit pop musical and ballet with a libretto by Bienvenido Lumbera and music by Nonong Pedero. The book was based on research in Manuvu folktales done by the anthropologist E. Arsenio Manuel. The use of dancers as well as pop singers made it not only high entertainment, but a source of genuine insights into the beliefs, values, mythological history, indeed the cosmos, of one community of Filipinos with a particular ethnic culture.

The PETA Metropolitan Teen Theater League created side-splitting entertainment and pointed social comment in *Kontsabahan sa Tirarang* (by Jack Yabut, 1979), which brought to the boards the ant world of legend, this time with rulers, armed might, sycophants, foreign traders, oppressed and eventually rebellious worker ants. PETA also explored various ways of staging myth and legend in Domingo Landicho's *Dupluhang Bayan* (discussed in the next section), which incorporates the creation myth about the bamboo, and stories of the *tukmo* bird and of the monkey and the turtle.

Amelia Lapeña Bonifacio's *6 na Dulang Pilipino para sa mga Bata* (1975, published 1976), take off from such folk tales as "Ang Manok at ang Lawin," "Kung Paano Pinatay ng mga Ibaloi ang Higante," etc. to comment at child's level on society and relationships. Bonifacio has also used folklore in her puppet theater, Teatrong Mulat, as in *Abadeja, ang Ating Sinderella* (1977).

Certainly one of the most innovative uses of folklore is seen in Al Santos' *Juan Tamad vs. Paltos V* (1979). Using the sarsuwela

form loosely, Santos does a comic take-off on the Voltes V robot TV shows popular then with Filipino children. In a mythical barangay, a strong-man chieftain employs Japanese-made robots to impress and terrorize his people. The lazy rogue of Philippine folklore, Juan Tamad, becomes a reluctant, almost accidental hero who shows the people that they have the means to solve their problems without depending on the despotic leader. The humor, visual fun, and music attractively package (but do not hide) a rather direct social message.

Considering the myths, tales, epics, legends, and so forth, that are the heritage of every ethnic or regional Philippine group, and are gradually being made available by researchers, this particular avenue being taken by contemporary Philippine drama shows much promise. The various efforts already made show and suggest the variety of theatrical styles that would be feasible, and affirm the contemporaneity of entertainment, message and idea that is possible.

LINKING WITH THEATER TRADITION

Part of the turning back to vernacular theater that shaped contemporary drama was a rediscovery of the tradition that had been truncated by education in English, and banished to the provinces. Rolando Tinio, for example, dug into what he called "the repertory of the past," staging Precioso Palma's *Paglipas ng Dilim* (1920) at the Ateneo in the sixties, *Principe Baldovino*, a komedya retrieved from Palawan to open the CCP Little Theater in 1971, and a lavish production of Servando de los Angeles' *Ang Kiri* (1927) at the CCP in 1974. Daisy Avellana's staging of Severino Reyes' *Walang Sugat* (1902) in 1971 has been repeated in different theaters and taken abroad, making a total of more than fifty performances.

Dulaang Babaylan was formed in 1973 with the purpose of: (a) documenting and studying traditional Philippine drama; (b) staging authentic revivals of traditional drama forms; and (c) enriching and updating these forms with contributions from contemporary world theater. It has presented a Balagtas *sainete*, a Panganiban *drama*, *duplos*, comedies from the twenties and thirties, but its special contribution to the theatrical scene has been the updated *sinakulo* and the revival of Aurelio Tolentino

plays. Its first *sinakulo* in 1973 at the Luneta, juxtaposed scenes by a traditional *sinakulista* troupe from Bulacan with a modern *sinakulo* which "interpreted the passion of Christ in contemporary times as the suffering of religion at the hands of crass commercialism," and did this in a blending of "traditional text and style with contemporary television jingles, urban slang, and 'absurd' techniques of production."¹⁶ Later *sinakulos* situated the suffering, crucifixion, and salvation in various Philippine situations, such as farming (the plow as cross). The 1977 version had

. . . the Virgin Mary as Inangbayan and Christ as Indio being judged by Anas (Spanish colonialism), Caipas (American imperialism), Herodes (Japanese imperialism), and Pilate (the local elite which served as puppets of these colonizers). Departing from the traditional *sinakulo*, however, the Christ of Babaylan's modern passion play takes up arms against and wins over his oppressors, indeed a novel interpretation of the resurrection.¹⁷

Babaylan revived Aurelio Tolentino's *Bagong Cristo* (1907) in 1977, giving its concern with labor and unionism contemporary meaning. Its revival of *Kahapon, Ngayon at Bukas* (1903), one of the most effective of the anti-American plays of the first decade, included modern interpretations of the "seditious" staging techniques and, by providing contextual information about the time and the author, made the play's warnings about foreign domination real and immediate in 1976.

Much of the current attention given to traditional Philippine drama, however, has taken the direction of "putting new wine in old skins," using the old forms, with their proven audience appeal, to embody new matter and ideas. Isagani Cruz's sarsuwela *Hali-maw* (1971, music by Lutgardo Labad) replaced the domestic situations-cum-songs that made the sarsuwela regnant in the 1920s with hard-hitting satire, while retaining the farcical comedy. Also in 1971, *Ako!*, libretto and music by Bayani Mendoza de Leon, put in sarsuwela form the romance of two sidewalk vendors, as complicated by a corrupt policeman, bodyguard of a corrupt Councilor, and a falsely attributed murder. Domingo Landicho's *Sumpang Mahal* (1976, music by Rey Paguio), is about the rediscovered love of a Balikbayan and a hometown boy, which does

16. Tiongson, "PETA and BABAYLAN," p. 9.

17. Tiongson, "National Theater," p. 46.

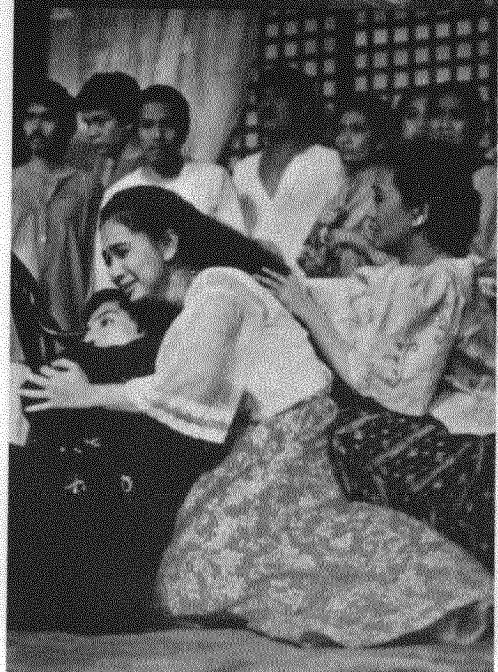
not end happily because of changed values and worlds. In *Ang Palabas Bukas* (1979, music by Lucio San Pedro), Bienvenido Lumbera has a small-town singer trying for big-city success, and painfully finding out the hollowness behind the glitter and gleam.

A successful contemporary sarsuwela is Amelia Lapeña Bonifacio's *Ang Bundok* (1976, music by Fabian Obispo, Jr., and Rodolfo de Leon), which has the obligatory love story of the traditional sarsuwela, but set against the struggle of a mountain tribe to safeguard its mine-rich lands from gold-seeking foreigners. The play focuses not on the resolution of the love story, but upon the decision of the community to stand together against aggression.¹⁸ The play that proves definitely the modern viability of the sarsuwela is Nicanor Tiongson's *Pilipinas circa 1907* (1982). Research makes possible the dramatization of historical incidents that crystallize American motives for Philippine colonization — so successfully that the 1982 audience made the conceptual leap and saw the reference to current questions about American economic presence in the Philippines. Equally successful theatrical research made the musical bouncy, flirtatious and romantic, reaching both the elders who recalled the zarzuela of the twenties, and the young who only knew musical comedy. The traditional sarsuwela, Tiongson and PETA proved, could purvey ideas while retaining both form and fun.

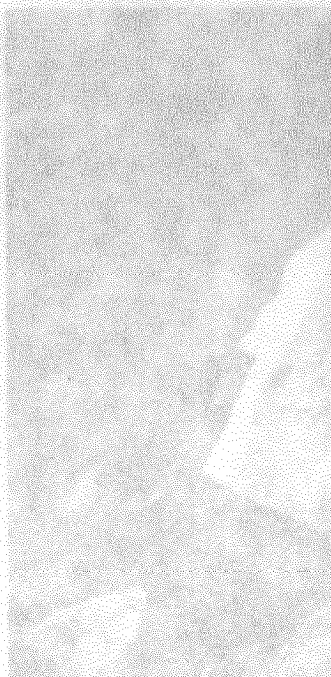
Ritual, the earliest form of Philippine drama, was explored by PETA in *Bodong* by Al Santos and Nic Cleto (1976). The burial ritual of an Igorot warrior features a narration, in song, by his grandson, that not only recalls Banna's heroism, but also the tribe's regard for an ancestor, Gatan, who had fought the Spaniards on the Cordillera. The songs, dances, and rituals end in a *bodong* or peace pact, a political institution that binds together mountain tribes in a unity of heritage and purpose.¹⁹

18. The young playwrights of Dulaang Sibol with or under the direction of Onofre Pagsanghan, have banked on their high school audience's interest in today's music, fashioning a number of plays that may loosely be called "descendants" of the sarsuwela. The first of the genre was Pagsanghan's *Sinta* (1975) which, although derived from *The Fantasticks* has, B. Lumbera feels, "evolved into an original creation, a play about the maturing of young love as told in verse and song that shimmer with nostalgia for the lost simple ways of earlier times." ("Theater since 1972," p. 31.) Since then, such plays as *Kaharian ng Araw* and *Adarna* have used music and verse to speak of the problems and hopes of the young.

19. The *bodong* has figured prominently in the news in the last couple of years, as tribes have gotten together to pledge unity in their resistance to the building of the Chico River dam.



"Pilipinas Circa
 1907," modern
 zarzuela by
 Nicanor Tiongson.
Above: Irma Ponce
 Enrile Potenciano as
 Señora Pilar; *left:*
 Lirio Vital and
 Louie Pascua as
 Leonor and Emilio.



**"Pilipinas Circa
 1907," modern
 zarzuela by
 Nicanor Tiongson.**
Top: Spanky
 Manikan and Nanette
 Moscardon as Andres
 and Pura; **bottom:**
 Lirio Vital as Leonor.

The Mass is ritual too, and this was made both spectacular and relevant in Bonifacio Ilagan's *Pagsambang Bayan* (1977), which follows the structure of the liturgy, but through dance, song, and movement involving the congregation (workers, farmers, youth, national minorities) and the priest — who midway sheds alb and chasuble for a worker's clothes — dramatizes the play's theme:

Ang mensahe ng liturhiya ay pagpapalaya. Ang *pagpapalaya* ay hindi nararapat na kulungin sa espirital na antas, sapagka't kung magkakaganuon, ang relihiyon at Simbahan ay tunay na magiging landas lamang sa pagtakas sa katotohanan, at pagpapatangay sa agos ng "kapalaran." Ang *pagpapalaya* ay kailangang sumaklaw sa araw-araw na buhay ng mga tao, sa sarili nilang kapaligiran at panahon. . . . ang papel ng Simbahan sa pamamagitan ng Ministry niya ay mabisa lamang nitong pagagampanan kung siya ay bababa, makikisalamuha, at makikisangkhot sa buhay-at-kamatayang pakikibaka ng sambayanan.²⁰

(The message of liturgy is liberation. Nor should liberation be limited to the spiritual plane, because then religion and the Church would truly become only ways to escape from the truth, or to drift with the current of "fate." Liberation necessarily has to include man's daily life, his own and actual environment and era . . . the ministry of the Church can only be effectively fulfilled if it descends from the heights, joins, and involves itself in the life-and-death struggles of the nation.)

The *duplo*, a game played at wakes, which features a hypothetical kingdom in which men and women show off imagination and literary flourish in extemporaneous jousting on love, adventures, myths, and the like, was given cogent shape and meaning in Domingo Landicho's *Dupluhang Bayan* (1976). Instead of *bilyakos* and *bilyakas*, the conventional starting "accusation" (who stole the king's *kulasisi*?) is hurled at workers and farmers. The ensuing debates are illustrated by folk tales as well as by a review of colonial history, and eventually focus on surrounding society. It ends with workers and farmers realizing that they are being pitted against each other by the powerful, and that much is to be gained by united effort:

Tangi ninyong dalit ay pamamanginoon
At kami ang bayan na ibinabaon
Sa dustang libingan ng dusa't linggatong.

20. Bonifacio Ilagan, "Buod ng Dula," *Pagsambang Bayan* Theater Program, U.P. Repertory Company, August 1977.

Ngunit bayan ay gising na,
Sa buhang liwayway ng aming pag-asa.²¹

(Your only song is domination,
And we are the people being buried
In the ignominious grave of grief and disquiet.
But the nation is now awake
To the dawning of our hope.)

In 1979, Alan Glinoga, Al Santos and Rody Vera took the traditional *panunuluyan*, a folk dramatization of Joseph and Mary's search for an inn, and gave it a contemporary twist. In PETA's *Ang Panunuluyan*, Joseph and Mary search for shelter in today's Manila, among landlords, manufacturing magnates, society gatherings, encountering street vendors, squatters, tenants, factory workers, and street urchins. They find rejection not only for themselves but for the poor, with whom they identify and find shelter.

In 1980 Manuel Pambid traced, in *Canuplin*, the life and development of one of Manila's earliest *bodabil* performers ("the Charlie Chaplin of the Philippines"). The play was not only biography, but a look back into *bodabil's* heyday as entertainment form, when it was the conduit for the influx of American popular culture, which still exercises dominance in Philippine life to the present.

An exciting meld of both traditional drama and history is Bonifacio Ilagan's *Estados Unidos Bersus Cruz, Abad at Tolentino . . .* (1981). The discovery of the English translation of Juan Matapang Cruz's *Hindi Aco Patay*, reputedly the most popular of the "seditious" plays, within a 1905 manuscript that detailed the raids, riots, arrests, trials, and puzzles attendant on the anti-American plays, prompted the creation of this new play. In it, *Hindi Aco Patay* is encased within the historical context of arrests and trials, as "court evidence." The core of the play is therefore the matter of "sedition," defined in 1901 by the U.S. insular government as the crime of advocating independence for the Philippines in any manner. The subtext is thus the larger question of American dominance of and intentions for the country.

21. Domingo Landicho, "Dupluhang Bayan," V. de la Torre, ed., *Readings in Bilingual Contemporary Philippine Literature: Dramas* (Manila: National Book Store, Inc., 1977), p. 163.

This conscious linking up with traditional drama forms has shown that a look backward is indeed a step forward. The traditional forms retain their place in the Philippine consciousness, and thus their appeal. They have also been shown to be capable of change, of accommodating new staging, new pace, new music, and certainly new matter and ideas.

OTHER DIRECTIONS

Adaptation of foreign plays has also often produced theater relevant to Philippine concerns. Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, adapted by Lito Tiongson and Franklin Osorio into *Ang Hatol ng Guhit na Bilog* (1975) and directed by Fritz Bennewitz, who had worked with the Berliner Ensemble, had a Mindanao setting, and placed the "story of class struggle within a distinct social milieu"²² squarely within Philippine life. Brecht's *Galileo Galilei* (1980), although a translation (by Alan Glinoga) and not an adaptation, was well received by its Filipino audience for its timely investigation of and comments on the suppression and fear of the truth.

Relatively few comedies have been written in the last decade, but they too occasionally make relevant comment — sometimes light, sometimes absurdist, sometimes biting — on the Philippine scene. Orlando Nadres' *Babae, Lalaki at Marami Pang Iba* inquires into the secret thoughts, hopes and pretensions of the personages at a wedding. Wilfrido Ma. Guerrero's *Close-Up* (1977, in Tagalog and English) casts a sardonic glance at the movie world and the methods and manners of success. Rolando Tinio's unusual *A Life in the Slums* (1976) "pricks through black humor and absurdist portraiture the pretensions of the social elite to social consciousness."²³ Isagani Cruz's *Ms. Philippines* (1979) is a light sarsuwela showing the various motives that impel girls to join beauty contests — money, one-upsmanship, fame, respectability, women's lib, and so forth.

22. "Synopsis," *Ang Hatol ng Guhit na Bilog*. Theater Program, PETA, December 1975.

23. Lumbera, "Theater since 1972," p. 30.

THEATER IN THE PROVINCES

All the theatrical activity traced above, with only a few exceptions, originate, happen, and usually end in Metro Manila.²⁴ In a paper calling for more craftsmanship and stage consciousness — and less “contest mentality” — among playwrights, director/actor/critic Behn Cervantes says that too often plays written in Metro Manila are “spectacular, epic in proportion, multi-cast, and therefore expensive and difficult to mount.” Furthermore, exposure to electronic media has made young playwrights use media techniques such as jump-cuts, multi-sets, flashbacks, etc. “Small wonder,” he says, that the plays produced in Greater Manila are “deemed impossible for staging in other parts of the country, where the greater number of our population exist and languish for theater . . . suitable to their needs, their capabilities and their interests.” This he calls Theater of Poverty, Theater of the Masses, Theater of the Third World.²⁵ One might add further that many plays are not “portable,” having been fashioned expressly for particular groups or theaters, e.g. the Raha Sulayman Theater, the Metropolitan, the CCP Little Theater.

There is, however, theatrical activity of various kinds in the provinces. Not only are there traditional and non-traditional

24. The exceptions would be *Mga Misteryo ng Hapis ni Sisa*, first performed in Lucban, Quezon, by Dulaang Banahaw and directed by the author, Rosauro de la Cruz; *Maranatha*, since Kolambugan Dance Theater is based in Kolambugan, Lanao; Al Santos' *Sa Bundok ng Apo*, which was first staged in Davao City; and the work of Sining Kambayoka, which is based at the Mindanao State University in Marawi City, Lanao del Sur. Plays like Dumol's *Paglilitis*, and Nadres' *Paraisong Parisukat* and *Hanggang Dito na Lamang* have been performed outside Metro Manila by different groups. Quite a number of the provincial drama groups, like the Ilocandia Dramatic Troupe, Pasig's Samahang Senakulista Sta. Teresa de Avila, and the komedya troupes of San Dionisio and Dongalo, Parañaque, are dedicated to traditional theater forms. Others are school- or community-based, such as Davao's Kulturang Atin and the Tuguegarao Community Playhouse. Still others are directly linked with government programs, such as Teatro Obrero, which started out at the Ateneo, and now implements programs of the National Media Production Center through provincial chapters; and Dulaang Kabataang Barangay. Unfortunately, little information is to be had about play writing and production in the provinces, except from the PETA outreach program, and from government reports, such as the Population Center Foundation's *Development Theater in the Philippines, An Exploratory Survey* (1980), which of course focuses mainly on developmental theater with possibilities for family planning programs.

25. Behn Cervantes, “Contemporary Filipino Playwriting,” address at a symposium on “The Artist in the Decade of the 80s,” Cultural Research Association of the Philippines, Quezon City, 26 April 1981.

drama groups, but in various cities, towns and barrios (as well as in depressed Metro Manila communities), workshops are held among students, farmers, workers, townspeople, barrio folk, by theater groups like PETA and Sining Kambayoka, and by school and church groups. Many of these aim not to develop professional actors, writers, directors and producers, but to enable the people to use theater for their needs – for entertainment, for self-expression, for the exposition and analysis of their conditions, concerns, and problems.

Nicanor Tiongson reports that in Davao, “farmers have been exposed to and have assimilated the styles of realism and expressionism, creating their own interpretations of these styles.” The tradition of plot-heavy radio drama, he feels, has made realism as practiced by the farmer “nothing short of melodrama,” except that “the situations and problems they present are painfully real, and the solution to these problems scientifically viable.”

He cites the example of *Ulser sa Katilingban* (1980), about a farmer whose belief in the benevolence of his landlord yields to the realization that the landlord’s “first loyalty is to himself.” *Ang Kabukiran* (1980) uses mime, song, and verse-prose in a narrative about an idyllic countryside destroyed by rats (landlords), floods (usury), storms (the bulldozers of landgrabbers), and wild pigs (military mercenaries). Workers and professionals help the farmers restore justice. A *kanta-koryo*, choreographed and mimed song, called *Bayabas ni Juan*, is a modern allegory about Juan Tamad, “so lazy he takes his guavas (natural resources) for granted until he wakes up one day to discover that ‘outsiders’ have all but carted away all his guavas.”²⁶

THE LIVELIEST VOICE

Contemporary Philippine drama, therefore, has its ancestry in indigenous ritual and custom, as well as in the traditional forms that developed during the Spanish and American colonial periods. Cut off from these roots by the introduction of English through the educational system, it drew sustenance from: (a) Western dramatic literature and theater techniques learned through the educa-

26. Tiongson, “National Theater,” p. 47.

tional system; and (b) the pressure — on language and subject matter — exerted by the nationalist consciousness and national problems that crystallized in the late sixties and early seventies.

From the proletarian political theater of pre-Martial Law days, the developing realistic temper, and a rediscovery of its roots came the character of contemporary Philippine theater of the last decade. This is theater vibrantly alive and well and definitely “the premier literary form of our time.”²⁷ Plays are being written and staged in “legitimate” theaters, school auditoriums, cafeterias, churches, parks, plazas, factories, offices, and fields. The writers, directors, actors, and producers are professionals or semi-professionals (even when professional in quality and conduct, no group can exist on ticket sales and sponsorships as yet; nor can any actor, director or playwright live on what he makes from theater), students, church members, workers, farmers, barrio and town folk, and teachers.

There never is much or enough money. In 1905, Arthur Riggs, military man, editor and eyewitness to the “seditious” dramas, expressed surprise and grudging admiration because plays were staged with no machinery, lights, tools, credit or money.²⁸ The situation has not changed much today, except that a few theaters do have machinery and lights. Still, Philippine theater is in a state of perennial poverty — yet perennially active.

Speaking principally of Metro Manila, B. Lumbera points out that “there are now at least 24 authors who have had at least two plays performed in the years between 1972 and 1979. More than half of this number are below 30, which means that . . . [their] best writing years . . . are still ahead of them.” The new playwrights are “products of the nationalist ferment of the previous decade,” and thus

reflect the questioning stance of the times when everything about the established order was subjected to scrutiny. Their daring and irreverence are tempered by partisanship which affirms service to the Filipino masses as the paramount expression of nationalism. Among them, “art for art’s sake” is a mark of moral and political bankruptcy, and “relevance” is the supreme criterion of the worth of any creative piece.²⁹

27. Lumbera, “Theater since 1972,” p. 19.

28. Arthur Riggs, *The Filipino Drama [1905]* (Manila: Intramuros Administration, 1981), p. 51.

29. Lumbera, “Theater since 1972,” pp. 27 and 31.

Today's theater is definitely in the vernacular — mainly Pilipino, but also Cebuano, Waray, Hiligaynon, Ilocano, etc. Even though National Artist Nick Joaquin has written three more plays in recent years (*Fathers and Sons*, based on his short story, "Three Generations"; *Tatarin*, based on his famous "Summer Solstice"; and *The Beatas*), and can no longer be called a one-play (*Portrait*) playwright, there has been no second spring for theater in English. In fact, both *Fathers and Sons* and *The Beatas* have been staged only in Pilipino translation (*Mga Ama, Mga Anak*, 1977; *Beatas*, 1978); and the general audience reaction to *Tatarin* (1978) was: "It would have been much more effective in Pilipino." Teatro Pilipino, started by Rolando Tinio in 1976, and dedicated mainly to the staging of his translations of foreign plays (Shakespeare, Chekhov, Shaw, Plautus, Moliere, Arbuzov, etc.) has not been too successful at building an audience, although it should be credited for making a body of Western classics available in Pilipino translation.

It is clear that Tinio was right when he said in 1971 that it was not that Philippine theater was in search of an audience, as the practitioners of theater in English put it; but that the vast Philippine audience was in search of a theater — the right theater. That theater is here, Philippine in language and content, and fast developing. It has reached out to its audience through various theater techniques, old and new, Asian and Western, native and foreign; and through various avenues of expression, most but not all leading to confrontation with social problems.

It has made the strongest and boldest statements of criticism, protest and exhortation since the declaration of Martial Law, something that has not been done by poetry, fiction, the essay, or even journalism.³⁰ This it has done theatrically, often artistically, and certainly imaginatively. Use has been made, as we have seen, of (a) history, (b) social documentation, (c) folklore, and (d) traditional theater forms. A "literature of circumvention," as B. Lumbera puts it, has been developed by need:

Over the last five years, there has been a growing body of new writing that indicates that self-censorship has modulated into a literary posture

30. One play that was presented around Metro Manila a number of times was seemingly unnoticed by the authorities. When a foreign news-magazine, however, took note of its implied but clear criticism of the prevailing order, the director was taken into detention camp, and the author called for questioning.

which makes a virtue of circumvention. Nationalist consciousness implanted among writers by the mass movement of the late 1960s has found a way of asserting itself through approved artistic trends. Nativist nationalism encourages artists to look back to the country's past to retrieve forgotten folkloric material, a neglected traditional form, or a historical moment of interest to the present. The word "developmental" has been cultivated as a substitute for "committed," and developmental writing is supposed to analyze social reality from the perspective of the New Society These trends have become the avenue whereby nationalist writers circumvent regulation and regimentation in the arts.³¹

Is there, then, a national Philippine theater? There is no visible edifice, certainly, as there is a state-supported National Theater in England. There is no National Endowment for the Arts, as there is in the United States. There is no state subsidy; there are few grants for playwrights, directors, theater groups, theaters, or actors. The Cultural Center of the Philippines is hospitable to Philippine drama, and conducts one of the major playwriting contests, but its theaters, even the small, experimental Bulwagang Gantimpala, are beyond the finances of most theater groups.

What then is there? There is a national theater movement that includes various groups spread throughout the country, based in communities — student, church, rural, urban, ethnic, work communities — and one in their concern for Philippine experience as the matter for theater. It is a Third World type of national theater — fragmented, impoverished, struggling, but united in the intent to speak of the Filipino past and present, of Filipino problems and aspirations, of the Filipino struggle and dream. It is a developing theater, still learning craftsmanship, experimenting with forms, evolving through discovery of its roots and integration of foreign influences, and responding to the needs of its audience and the demands of history and society.³²

It is a live, active, vital theater that, even in evolution, is eloquent about the nation from which it draws life, and to whose future it wishes to contribute.

31. Lumbera, "The Nationalist Struggle and the Filipino Writer," p. 20.

32. See also Isagani Cruz, "The Narrative Fallacy: Tradition and Modernity in Philippine Drama in the Eighties." Address, Third National Conference, Philippine Center of International P.E.N. December 14, 1980, as well as D. Fernandez, "Theater today: going home again," *Archipelago* (1975) A-22, pp. 10-14; "The Past is Prologue . . ." Address, Third National Conference, Philippine Center of International P.E.N. 14 December 1980; "From Ritual to Realism: A Brief Historical Survey of Philippine Theater," *Philippine Studies* 28 (1980):389-419.