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The Emergence of Modern Drama in the Philippines (1898 - 1912)

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Book Reviews

THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN DRAMA IN THE PHILIPPINES (1898-1912). By Tomas C. Hernandez. (Philippine Studies Working Paper No. 1). Hawaii: Asian Studies Program, University of Hawaii, 1976. 204 pages.

This study, the first of a series of Working Papers planned by the Philippine Studies program at the University of Hawaii, is based on the author's doctoral dissertation. It focuses on the drama that emerged after the Philippine Revolution of 1896, called "modern" by the author because, unlike the *kumedyá* or *moro-moro* which preceded it, it "depicted contemporary native characters, themes, and situations" rather than the exotic characters (mainly European nobility) and situations (Moorish and Christian conflicts) of the *kumedyá*.

This modernity the author sees as having been shaped by political, social, and cultural, as well as dramatic and theatrical factors. The political factor was the growth of Philippine nationalism in reaction to both Spanish and American colonization, which initiated a nationalistic tradition in Philippine literature. Socially and culturally, he sees the influence of the native bourgeoisie, its economic prosperity and ensuing desire to attain urbanity in the Spanish manner, which caused a turning away from the *kumedyá*, and the patronage of foreign forms of entertainment. Dramatically and theatrically, the turn-of-the-century Philippine drama was influenced by the imported Spanish zarzuelas, romantic dramas, comedies, Italian operas, and Spanish plays written and staged in the Philippines in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a body of Western-style drama that Filipino playwrights came to consider "modern."

In chapter 1, a brief introduction defines the purpose and limits of the research, and outlines the succeeding chapters. Only plays in Tagalog — with the exception of one play in Spanish — were studied (although synopses of others in Pampangan, Pangasinan, and Ilocano were considered) for two reasons: first, the drama expressive of Philippine nationalism would be logically in the vernacular; and secondly because major upheavals in theater originated in Tagalog-speaking Manila. A question intrudes at this point: if plays in Pampangan, Pangasinan, and Ilocano were considered, why not plays

in the other vernaculars, like Bicolano, Cebuano, Hiligaynon? As the author notes, the first known vernacular play distinct from the kumedyas was written in Hiligaynon in 1878.

Chapter 2 is devoted to premodern Filipino drama, and is a competent gathering of information on early dramatic forms, ritual to kumedyas, from friars' accounts, as well as from literary and historical studies. The characteristics and audience of the kumedyas as described in historical sources is discussed at some length. Here one could wish that a clearer distinction had been made between the Spanish *comedia* (a play in three acts and in verse on secular or religious subjects) and the vernacular kumedyas (a play in three acts or more, in verse, dealing with Moorish-Christian conflicts, with plots generally derived from the *awits* and *corridos* adapted from European metrical romances). Furthermore, although no examples of seventeenth and eighteenth century kumedyas seem available to the researcher, an examination of nineteenth (including Francisco Baltazar's recently recovered *Orosman at Zafira*) and twentieth century scripts or the witnessing of contemporary staging could have generated a more succinct picture of what the kumedyas is. More attention to the *sinakulo* also seems called for, since it is a form that shares certain dramatic and theatrical characteristics with the kumedyas.

Chapter 3 surveys the period before the Revolution, being the background for the emergence of modern Filipino drama. It touches on the literature of the Propaganda Movement, and on Spanish theater in the late nineteenth century, including the literary societies, physical theaters and foreign artists that supported the whole movement. This local bourgeois theater reached its fullest development in the 1890s, even while the kumedyas "remained the favored entertainment of the masses." The author points out, however, that after the Revolution:

Although the masses led the uprising, the theater which was characteristically theirs — the *kumedyas* — did not survive the upheaval. The *kumedyas* gave way to a new drama — nationalistic in intent, native in characters, local in situations, for the most part realistic in plot, and prosaic in dialogue — which more directly derived from the local bourgeois theater (p. 73).

Although the change in dramatic content is clear from the plays that followed the kumedyas, one might add that the kumedyas did survive — and indeed survives to this day — if not in the city, certainly in the towns and provinces, even in Rizal province, which surrounds Manila.

Chapter 4 discusses the period of the Revolution as background for the modern plays, mentioning as well the rise of militant newspapers between 1900 and 1912, and the emergence of the Tagalog novel, which established the prose tradition in vernacular literature and achieved mass appeal through characters and situations which hewed more closely to actual Philippine life than did the *awits*, *corridos*, and kumedyas. After the Revolution, the author

notes, actors of the local Spanish theater made a transition from Spanish to vernacular plays, thus bridging the gap between the bourgeois and the native theater.

The core of the research is in chapter 5, which studies the authors, plots, and staging of the modern plays. These, the author divides into three categories: anti-colonialist plays both anti-Spanish and anti-American; native zarzuelas; and domestic non-musical plays in the vernacular (what are popularly called *dramas*). These three types he sees as sharing "a common modernity:"

a realism which employed the "now," the "we," and the "here," as opposed to the "long ago," the "they," and the "there," of the *kumedyas* . . . realism [which] consists less of a dramatic style than of an attitude born of the Revolution. A sense of national identity motivated early modern Filipino playwrights to utilize dramatic elements which were recognizably Filipino: plots were set in the Philippines; they involved native characters; settings and costumes were distinctively local; the language of dialogue and song was the vernacular (p. 89).

The anti-Spanish plays studied are Tomas Remigio's *Malaya* (written 1898; staged 1902); Gabriel Beato Francisco's *Ang Katipunan* (1889); Manuel Xeres Burgos' *Con la cruz y la espada* (1900) — included as revelatory of the *ilustrado* desire for a reformed Spanish colonial government rather than an end to Spanish rule — Catalino Palisoc's Pangasinan zarzuela *Say Liman Ag Naketket, Pampansiwan* (1901) and Severino Reyes' *Walang Sugat* (1902).

The anti-American plays discussed at some length are Juan Matapang Cruz's *Hindi Aco Patay* (1903) — based on reports in American newspapers; Juan Abad's *Tanikalang Guinto* (1902) and the justly famous *Kahapon, Ngayon, at Bukas* (1903) by Aurelio Tolentino, as well as other plays mentioned in the newspaper accounts of the period. All of these were active responses to the reality of American oppression, and all caused the arrests of the authors and sometimes of the performers and production crew. Information on the staging of these plays is culled from newspaper accounts and from stage directions provided by the writers, which of course do not necessarily reflect the devices and techniques of the actual staging.

The native domestic zarzuelas are studied next, from the earliest recorded production, Mariano Proceso Pabalan's *Ing Managpe* (Pampanga, 1900) to the Tagalog zarzuelas ("The full flowering of the native *zarzuela* . . .") of such as Severino Reyes and Patricio Mariano. The author sees the zarzuelas in continuity with the *kumedyas* because in both, "the immediate theatrical impact is more important than the internal logic of the play. The aim of the performance is to move, amuse, entertain, and at best, impress the audience with the concrete results, rather than the intellectual implications, of an abstract theme."

The *drama* ("modern domestic non-musical plays") is sparsely discussed,

since the only two plays mentioned, Juan Crisostomo Soto's *Delia*, and Aurelio Tolentino's *Bagong Cristo*, were not available to the author.

The audiences for these native modern plays is seen by the author as part "middle class" and part "lower class," thus a fusion of the mass audiences for the kumedyá and the educated class that had been exposed to Western forms of theater.

The cut-off date for the study, 1912, is explained in this chapter as being the date of the entry of Tagalog films, "a less demanding form of entertainment [which] enticed the audience who had just become familiar with the new conventions introduced by the native zarzuelas and nonmusical plays." The year 1912 seems a somewhat premature ending date for a study of the zarzuela and the drama, since it is in the second decade of the twentieth century that the most popular examples (some zarzuelas running into hundreds of performances) were written and staged. It was the "talkies," not the early silent films, that provided real competition to this live theater.

The final chapter summarizes findings, and concludes that theme constitutes the distinctive modernity of the anti-colonialist plays, while that of the zarzuelas and dramas lies in the "dramatization of everyday experiences, conflicts, and sentiments of Filipinos confronted by and confronting local problems, problems which are especially relevant to a new nation." Its two major conclusions are: "first, the impetus of the Revolution contributed largely to the emergence of modern Filipino drama; second, the early manifestations of this drama embody both indigenous and foreign dramatic and theatrical traditions which flourished before the Revolution."

The weakness of the study lies in the fragility of the structural supports provided for the thesis of modernity, namely, the relatively small number of plays studied (14 complete texts, 35 synopses, 23 titles). Most of these, moreover, are discussed on the bases of synopses found in master's theses, anthologies, or newspaper accounts. Playwrights of the period very seldom saw their plays published, and this is indeed a problem for the researcher, who thus has to track down single-copy texts, manuscripts, or fragments in the keeping of families, relatives, actors, or production staff. Research in Philippine drama is thus perforce field research, and the author's difficulty was his distance from his field, which led to heavy reliance on synopses prepared by other researchers. These synopses, even when assumed accurate, are necessarily filtered through the researcher's interests, perspective and viewpoint, and may therefore omit, minimize, or reinterpret just those elements which could support or vitiate, strengthen or weaken a thesis. Titles, of course, are even less helpful than synopses. A title may not necessarily indicate a play's content, for it may be used allusively, allegorically, ironically, and in other ways, and might even be a bibliographical ghost. An examination of the actual texts is absolutely necessary to a study such as this, as would be interviews with authors' descendants, former actors, and the like.

Further field research on the kumedyá would also have been useful, since, as already mentioned, the kumedyá was replaced by the modern forms only in the cities, but with both the zarzuela and the drama continues to survive in the provinces to the present. Research in ongoing theatrical performances and practices (affected by, but not obliterated by the advent of film) could have yielded information relevant to this study of what constitutes modernity in Philippine drama.

As it stands, however, the Hernandez study is a valuable contribution to research in Philippine drama. It gathers together and organizes some information from ethnographic, literary, and historical sources that would be valuable to other researchers in the field. Most vitally, it examines this information against the background of Philippine society and history. Its suggestion that the growing nationalism, the Revolution against Spain, and active opposition to American colonization, brought about a turning point in the content and form of Philippine drama, is a valid insight that should be considered and strengthened by further research into the plays of this period and their performance.

Doreen G. Fernandez

THE JOHN DOE ASSOCIATES: *Backdoor Diplomacy for Peace, 1941*. By R. J. C. Butow. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1974. 480 pages, \$16.95.

International diplomatic moves in the year prior to Pearl Harbor affected enormously the lives of all men of my generation, and the course of history in East and Southeast Asia through the past 36 years.

This readable and carefully researched monograph of R. J. C. Butow, professor of Foreign Area Studies and Diplomatic History at the University of Washington, takes us behind the scenes of the 1941 top-level diplomatic conversations between American Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Admiral Kochisaburu Nomura, ambassador of Japan, in Washington, D.C. Butow focusses the reader's attention on the persistent and rather effective efforts of a Maryknoll priest, a Japanese banker, and an Imperial Army colonel to shape the course and contents of those crucial talks.

A State Department official aptly dubbed the trio, with a small circle of named and unnamed helpers, "the John Doe Associates," — well-intentioned, private meddlers whose considerable influence on events ultimately turned out to be clearly more harmful than helpful to the preservation of the peace they had hoped to serve.

Butow is the author of two other important works on the Pacific War, *Tojo and the Coming of the War*, and *Japan's Decision to Surrender*. He writes with scholarly integrity from uncommon familiarity with primary sources, both Japanese and American.