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## **The Dancers and Bienvenido Santos: The Day the Dancers Came**

Review Author: Miguel A. Bernad

*Philippine Studies* vol. 16, no. 4 (1968): 798–802

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Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

## THE DANCERS AND BIENVENIDO SANTOS

THE DAY THE DANCERS CAME. Selected Prose Works. By Bienvenido N. Santos. Manila: Bookmark, 1967. viii, 195 pp.

### I

This book takes its title from the leading story in the collection. The "dancers" of the title are the Bayanihan or one of the other Filipino dance-groups that have toured the United States, performing their spectacular repertory of Filipino folk-dances, in other words, the same kind of group that had also inspired N. V. M. Gonzalez's novel, *The Bamboo Dancers*.

Of the ten pieces in Mr. Santos' collection, one is an essay, another a play. The play is not without merit—if the dialogue could be left to speak for itself without overlong narrations and stage-directions. The essay, on the other hand, is of such little intrinsic merit that one wonders at its inclusion.

The eight stories in the book could also have stood some weeding out. The two weakest stories belong to the material used in Mr. Santos' novel, *Villa Magdalena*. When a carpenter or cabinet-maker has completed a cabinet, he sweeps up the shavings and throws them away. A novelist should do the same: not gather up the shavings and publish them in another book. In this case, the shavings happen to be inferior material. Mr. Santos is too good a writer to risk his reputation by the publication of such bits of sentimental rhetoric as the following: "I never thought of the Santiago river or missed it at all except when I came upon some old things, like notebooks marked by my own hand. . . . Or when I crossed other rivers, in faraway places, or sat along their banks, pressing my hand on some green grass, listening to laughter and voices, smelling fragrance that was not like the odor of burning cane fields and morning breaking above a river that said goodbye."

A river *can* say goodbye if the writer makes it, but not by simply saying that the river was doing so.

### II

There is a common theme running through the various stories in this book, a theme likewise apparent in the one-act play. It is that of exile and of homelessness. The protagonists can no longer stay at home, so they go away. Or they go abroad expecting to find a home, and find none. Or they don't go away: they keep coming back home, only to find that there is really no home to come back to.

The theme is of course not new. Mr. Santos has already explored it in the stories about Filipino expatriates in his earlier volume, *You Lovely People*.

This basic theme of exile or of homelessness is reinforced by other themes equally tragic. For instance, loneliness: the loneliness of an ex-pugilist going blind; or of coming home to a house abandoned by wife and servants.

Or disillusionment. A man who buys and sells old newspapers by the weight is discovered to be dishonest with his weighing machines. An American woman is happy with her steady friendship with a young and rich Filipino visitor to Washington, until she discovers that he is really ashamed of her. A teacher, who has some money coming to him, gets over some government red-tape, through the help of a former student; he is grateful for the help until he discovers that the former student expects a percentage of the money for his trouble.

This last episode, incidentally, occurs in a remarkable story in which a teacher reminisces about his former students. If this story is autobiographical, then Mr. Santos is more than just a good writer: he is also a very good teacher.

### III

*The Day the Dancers Came* is also a story of disillusionment. The protagonist is a Filipino "old-timer" in the United States, who has served briefly as a corporal in the U. S. Army and who has been admitted to American citizenship. Not very highly educated and possessing no special skill, he has drifted through many jobs—the kind of jobs open to a Filipino in America: waiter, cook, gardener, servant, menial attendant in a hospital. In the process he has made enough money to buy a car and a tape-recorder but not much else. He has had to be thrifty ("You have lived on loose-change all your life"). And he lives in Chicago, in a cheap two-room apartment, which he shares with another Filipino an ex-Pullman porter who has been laid off for illness. The illness might be cancer, or it might be leprosy.

Into this drab world comes an unexpected ray of sunshine: the news that a troupe of Filipino dancers are coming to Chicago. To Antonio, the ex-Pullman porter preoccupied with his pain, the news means nothing. But to Filemon Acayan, the veteran of many menial jobs, it means the beginning of romance. He has been many years away from his native land and all his relatives are dead. The advent of the dancers reminds him of many things he has forgotten about home.

In this frame of mind, he allows himself the luxury of entertaining a modest ambition. The dancers of course are young people: Filipino

girls and boys in their teens or their early twenties. Filemon has now only one desire: to meet these young people when they come to Chicago and to show them the city. He would introduce himself to them, ask them for the news from home, offer to drive them around the town. For this he has cleaned his car ("soaped the ashtrays, dusted off the floor boards and thrown away the old mats, replacing them with new plastic throw rugs"). Then of course he hopes that the young people would accept his invitation to come to his flat.

The idea of bringing visitors to the flat horrifies his companion: "Here? Aren't you ashamed of this hole?" But Filemon does not think the idea preposterous. "It's not a palace, I know, but who wants a palace when they can have the most delicious *adobo* here and the best stuffed chicken?"

And while the young people are enjoying his *adobo* and his chicken, he would have his tape-recorder on. "I'm going to keep their voices, their words and their singing and their laughter..."

Such is his dream. A pathetic dream, really, for he does not realize that for him, even such a modest ambition is impossible.

On the day of the dancers' arrival, he goes to their hotel. "When Fil arrived at the Hamilton, it seemed to him the Philippine dancers had taken over the hotel. They were all over the lobby, on the mezzanine, talking in groups animatedly" and mostly in English. They are attractive young people. From one corner of the lobby Filemon looks out at the gay company and notes the many details that make them so attractive: the long black hair of the women, the eyes that disappear into tiny slits when they laugh. "For a moment the sight seemed too much for him for he had all but forgotten how beautiful Philippine girls were."

Their perfume also is exquisite: "It was fragrance long forgotten, essence of *camia*, of *ilang-ilang* and *dama de noche*."

So here at last is what he has been waiting for. Here are the dancers. And here he is.

And at last he is made to realize how foolish he has been to dream of entertaining them. His clumsy efforts to introduce himself do not succeed, and his invitations are not accepted. These youngsters after all belong to a level of society much higher than his. Moreover he is ugly: his menial profession is stamped on his face. He has lived in slums all his life; these youngsters, well lodged and professionally guided and chaperoned, do not need him or his car to get around the city.

Dejected, he goes home. But there is still some hope. The dancers perform in the evening and he goes to see the performance. He takes with him his tape-recorder.

He comes home in great excitement. He has seen a wonderful performance and he has all of the music on record. He plays it back. With the sound of the music and of the applause he can again see the auditorium filled with people and the nimble dancers displaying their art. "All the beautiful boys and girls were in the room now, dancing and singing." In his mind he could again see their picturesque folk-dances: Igorot dances, Muslim dances, wedding festivals, neighbors moving a house.

He may not have been successful in his attempt to hobnob with the dancers. But here at least, in his tape-recorder, he has a perpetual remembrance of their songs and dances. The sound of the mighty ovation, played back by the tape, awakens his suffering companion in the next room. "Turn that thing off," the companion complains. Filemon Acayan complies. He does not realize that he has pressed the wrong button. The spool unwinds. It is only at the end that he realizes the whole tape has been erased.

Is this perhaps an allegory of the expatriate's fate? Antonio, the unimaginative ex-porter, preoccupied with his own pain, has nothing to look forward to but a painful death. Filemon, more imaginative, finds all his dreams vanish into a blank tape.

#### IV

Splendid as this story is, it too has its flaws—though mercifully the flaws are at the beginning and therefore quickly forgotten. "That fall, Chicago was a sandman's town, sleepy valley, drowsy gray, slumbrous mistiness from sun-up till noon when the clouds drifted away in ceciliflower clusters and suddenly it was evening." That sentence occurs in the first paragraph of the story. It is not a good beginning. And not a very good sentence.

Another flaw, also at the beginning of the story, is a false note in characterization. Here is the passage:

*As soon as Fil woke up he noticed a whiteness outside, quite unusual for the November mornings.... Now there was a brightness in the air and Fil knew what it was and he shouted, "Snow! It's snowing!"*

*Tony, who slept in the adjoining room, was awakened.*

*"What's that?" he asked.*

*"It's snowing," Fil said, smiling to himself as if he had ordered this and was satisfied with the prompt delivery. "Oh, they'll love this, they'll love this."*

*"Who'll love that?" Tony asked, his voice raised in annoyance.*

*"The dancers, of course," Fil answered. "They're arriving today...."*

A person reading that passage would get the impression that the "Fil" in the story is a boy. His reaction to the prospect of snow is that of a boy—or at least of a very young man. It is with dismay that the reader afterwards finds that Fil is fifty years old, who has served in the U. S. Army and has become an American citizen and has drifted through many jobs, to whom, in short, snow is not a new phenomenon.

What Mr. Santos of course wanted to convey was that in his preoccupation with the visiting Filipino dancers, Fil becomes excited at the prospect of snow, since it would give the visitors from the Philippines their first opportunity to see a snow-covered landscape.

Fair enough. But Fil must act his age. If he is to get excited at the prospect of snow, it should be the quiet, pleased anticipation of a 50-year-old ex-corporal, not the jubilant enthusiasms of a teen-ager.

*"For Fil, time was the villain. In the beginning the words he often heard were: too young, too young; but all of a sudden too young became too old, too late. What had happened in between? A weariness, a mist covering all things. You don't have to look at your face in a mirror to know that you are old, suddenly old, grown useless for a lot of things and too late for all the dreams you had wrapped up well against a day of need."*

That is Bienvenido Santos at his best.

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

## A RADICAL ASSESSMENT OF CHRISTIANITY

TOWARD A CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY. By Brian Wicker.  
Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967. xi, 305 pp.

Readers of *Philippine Studies* may have been disappointed in finding Leslie Dewart's book, *The Future of Belief*, surprisingly short (222 pages, including index) in proportion to the review (67 pages), which it received in a recent issue. There are other reasons, to be sure, for being disappointed with Dewart, and those who still hope to see an erudite and daring assessment of theism in our time may