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The First Vernacular Zarzuela

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Notes & Comment

The First Vernacular Zarzuela

"It was Pampango, before any other native language, that first adopted the *zarzuela* form." Thus wrote Mariano Proceso Pabalan Byron of Bacolor in the preface to his one-act *zarzuela*, *Ing Managpe* (The Patcher), a comedy in which the differences between a jealous nagging wife and her exasperated husband are resolved by a faithful servant.

Many *zarzelas* had been staged in the Philippines before *Ing Managpe*—in Spanish. Troupes from Spain and Italy had come swarming into the country, and musical-comedy stars such as Dario Céspedes, Alejandro Cubero, Elisea Raguer and Yeyeng Fernández had become almost household names. Practically every local playwright had at least one *zarzuela* to his name. Even Rizal went along with the fashion and contributed his *Junto al Pasig*. From 1878 to the end of the century Tagalogs, Ilokanos, Bikolanos, Cebuanos were writing and producing *zarzelas*, but not one in a native language. It was left for Pabalan, the Pampango, to pioneer in this field.

Proceso Pabalan was born on 4 July 1863, in Bacolor, and died on 2 January 1904. His father was Potenciano Pabalan, his mother, Dorotea Dimabuyu Byron. He was baptized by Father Mariano Alvarez, with Don Heriverto Tambunggui as godfather. He was variously known as Eme Pepe, Cuntil-Butil, Marcos Parabola Pianan. He was followed on the trail he blazed by other Pampango *zarzuelistas*: Juan Crisóstomo Soto, Félix Galura Napao, Aurelio and Jacinto Tolentino, Felino Simpao.

Ing Managpe was first presented to the public on 1 September 1900 in the Teatro Sabina of Bacolor. Pabalan wrote it because he believed that a Philippine vernacular could be set to the music of the *zarzuela* just as well as Spanish. "True enough," he said, "Spanish is sweet and soft; our language is hard and stiff. But is it only Spanish that can be set to music?" With *Ing Managpe* he successfully

made his point. And it had another important effect. It initiated a change in the zarzuela plot.

The story lines of the zarzuelas up to that time, whether written by Spaniards or Filipinos, were Spanish. What drew Filipino audiences to them was not so much the action as the colorful costumes and scenery, the handsome actors and pretty swooning actresses. All this was changed by Pabalan's *Ing Managpe*. Thereafter, the Philippine zarzuela had only one dominant theme: the Filipino family. There were infinite variations: the quarrel between tired husband and jealous wife; the love of poor boy for rich girl (or vice-versa); parental opposition to a marriage (usually unreasonable); servants ludicrously mimicking their masters (in their absence); but always within the framework of family life.

It is interesting to note that even Filipino motion pictures drew heavily on this theme as late as the 1930s. *Takip-Silim* and *Princesita* were typical examples. Audiences never seemed to grow tired of it; in fact, they were annoyed if plots became unexpectedly political or historical. The last two themes were usually reserved for the serious, non-musical play—what the Tagalogs call *dulâ* and the Pangangos *drama*.

At any rate, whether owing to Pabalan's success or because of a general movement of increasingly conscious nationalism, zarzuela writers in other regions of the country began to use their native tongues also. The closest in date to *Ing Managpe* was a Pangasinan zarzuela first staged in 1901: *Say Limang Ag Nakethet, Pampinsiwian* (The Hand that Cannot be Cut Off Must be Kissed) by Catalino Palisoc. That same year Severino Reyes presented *Walang Sugat* (Without a Wound), the first Tagalog zarzuela. The Sugbuanon zarzuela did not make its debut until 1917 with Buenaventura Rodriguez's *Inday*. It is true that Vicente Sotto had earlier (1901) written a Sugbuanon play, *Gugma sa Yutang Natawhan* (Love for Country), but it was not strictly speaking a zarzuela.

The Bikol region, which because of its prosperity was frequently visited by Spanish zarzuela troupes and French and Italian opera companies, may possibly have had a zarzuela that antedated Pabalan's, but there are no records to show it. The earliest known zarzuela script in Bikol dates only from 1907. As for the Iloko region, it did not have its first zarzuela until 1925.

The zarzuela of the Pabalan type dominated the Philippine native theater for roughly four decades, 1900-1940. All over the country, on makeshift stages of bamboo and wood, provincial audiences saw the bright side and the ludicrous side of their daily lives re-enacted and set to music. And in the laughter with which they greeted the images in this "mirror held up to nature" there was, perhaps, the beginnings of self-knowledge.

At the end of this period the indigenous zarzuela disappeared almost as suddenly as it began. After World War II they ceased to be written and produced almost completely. This is difficult to explain, but an explanation might be attempted.

There was a certain falsity in the image of Philippine life presented by the zarzuela which probably doomed it to eventual extinction. This consisted in its partiality to the brighter side of life, its refusal to look at the shadows. Life in the zarzelas was invariably one of Arcadian ease, unambitious simplicity, and a touching confidence that all would turn out right in the end.

If real life were all these, the zarzuela might have survived as a vital art form to this day. But even in those days, the Filipinos of the rural areas were already afflicted by disease and hunger, even as today they are faced by unemployment, high prices, and the over-hanging threat of destruction in a nuclear war. At any rate, whether life in the Philippines has become more difficult, or Filipinos have become more serious in their outlook, the fact is that the zarzuela no longer seems able to call forth the laughter of the twenties and thirties. Not that Filipinos have lost their sense of humor; it is only that what now moves them to laughter is often something very close to tragedy. The zarzuela thrived when we could laugh without reflection; it died when we found out what the laughter was all about.

Another reason for the waning of the zarzuela may be that its dominant theme no longer has the appeal it used to. The family is still the basic unit of our national life, but it is going through the same process of change as in other developing countries. When Pabalán was writing the individual's life was almost wholly centered in that of his family, so much so that the severance of family ties was almost always looked upon as the act of a black sheep or prodigal son. But today, with increasing economic development and industrialization, the need to leave one's family and look for work elsewhere has become inevitable; and because inevitable, the normal state of affairs.

Thus the zarzuela's primary theme has become outmoded in an age of increasing individualism. It has lost its power to move audiences consisting largely of black sheep and prodigal sons. We can appreciate it today only by an effort of the historical imagination.

ELY JAVILLONAR-MARQUEZ

The Liturgical Reform of Vatican II

When Pope John XXIII convened the second Vatican Council, he did so with the intention of setting in motion a reform of the