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The Arts: January to June

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Survey

The Arts: January To June

Blaming "psychiatry and the civil service," Evelyn Waugh once called attention to an unwholesome contemporary appetite for categories of all kinds. "People seem to be comforted instead of outraged," said he, "when they are told that their eccentricities entitle them to membership in a class of 'psychological types'."

This may be disconcerting for Mr. Waugh, but for the reviewer who, in whetting this contemporary appetite, faces the unpalatable task of excluding from his review all those events which are not classifiable as Art, it is welcome simplification. Not all manifestations of "culture" (that curious word which the French have consistently refused to admit into their intellectual vocabulary) can then be considered meat for a cultural survey—much less so for an art survey—and with this happy thought, we make the unhappy observation that in the first semester of 1961, the Rizal Centennial celebrations have engendered events which are better styled social and/or political.

Tea musicales, academic picture exhibits, angry debates about national monuments, literary contests with an unintended lack of emphasis on either of these two words—you name it, "we've had it."

At this point, one is tempted to succumb and begin categorizing whatever there is left to categorize. The temptation triumphs.

THE DANCE

The visit of the Royal Ballet in mid-May and the departure shortly thereafter of the *Filipinescas* troupe for old worlds to conquer are a satisfying instance of the type of cultural give-and-take that is entirely beneficial for all concerned.

As a result of the first, Manilans gained the very rare privilege of witnessing the performance of a truly superb corps de ballet. To be sure, prima-ballerinas and premier-danseurs have many times before thrilled local audiences. One remembers, for instance, Danilova, Alicia Markova, Mia Slavenska, Anton Dolin, Nicholas Magallanes, and Jacques d'Amboise—but these stars had to count on the support of some local corps in which talent and discipline are admittedly not always of uniform quality; and when they were accompanied by members of their own organizations, as in the visits of the New York City and San Francisco ballet companies, the connoisseur could not always escape noticing a difference in quality between corps and principals.

It is not, of course, possible to ignore the drama and the lyricism in the dancing of Beryl Grey (especially in the pas de deux from Don Quixote), or of Anya Linden, or of Lynn Seymour, but we feel called upon to make a point of the corps' unmatched polish particularly because team spirit seems to be a definite distinction of British dancers. When this team spirit finds an eloquent outlet in the attempt to fulfill Fokine's modern ideal of total expression, then one cannot resist the conclusion that the British are doing a marvelous thing to the dance: they are making it their own by endowing it with a new dimension. Arnold Haskell, the English critic, has attributed this uniform, dramatic excellence of British dancers to the British character itself ("....temperamentally undemonstrative [they] welcome the chance of hiding themselves in a strong dramatic role..."). For our part, we note merely that when all members of a company, from the star with a reputation to uphold down to the newest recruit with a reputation yet to build, will consecrate hours of study and practice to the end that every role, no matter how small, and every nuance, no matter how subtle, can scintillate with a brilliance

unequalled in the balletic acting of the more established traditions, then their production becomes not merely a one-sided debat between breath-taking solos and the charming but relatively expendable movements of the corps; it becomes a picture overpowering in its completeness: the harsh outlines are muted and the stage is graced by a rapport between corps and principals that we can best describe (if we pursue the metaphor) as decidedly painterly in execution.

Manilans watched the Royal Ballet perform to the music of Fauré, Tchaikovsky, Chopin, Minkus, and Stravinsky for three memorable nights (19th to 21st May). They watched enchanted and exploded into prolonged ovation—and if many a balletomane thought that three nights were altogether too short a time, a recent letter from London leaks the news that in 1962, when the Royal Ballet makes its Australian tour, Dame Ninette de Valois may once more collaborate with *The Philippines Herald* and the San Miguel Brewery (sponsors of the company's Philippine visit) in arranging for the dancers to stop again at the Rizal theatre.

Paradoxically, we know rather less of Filipinescas than of the Royal Ballet. We know that it is still another group of young people who, having been organized by Leonor Orosa-Goquingco, succeeded in securing for itself the patronage of the President of the Philippines. We also know that the group left the country in June to dance in the old stomping grounds of the Bayanihan and the FEU Folk Dancers. We know that in spite of tepid reports from the wire services concerning its initial Paris appearance, it soon warmed up sufficiently to distinguish itself by becoming the second Philippine dance organization to win the top prize at the Cáceres Folk Dance Festival.

Apart from this, however, we know very little about *Filipinescas*. The fault, if it must be called that, does not seem to be our own. Few privileged Filipinos have seen *Filipinescas* perform: the group did not choose to exhibit its repertoire publicly before leaving for Europe.

Still, from the scattered bits of information about Filipinescas, we seem to discover a point of attack (insofar as choreographic technique, theme, and costuming are concerned) similar to that taken by America's Martha Graham. If some future performance by Filipinescas on some local stage should bear us out on this, it might signal the opening of new vistas for dancers whose imaginations have heretofore been confined to composing prettified arrangements that at best can merely vary essentially the same steps, the same sway-balancing, the same clack-clacking of bamboo poles season after season. For then, Filipinescas (like the Graham theatre in America) would become the closest thing we Filipinos would have of theatre in the classical sense: it would—as it does even now, judging again from reports-be Greek in its use of "man's mythical life, his struggles in isolation," and in its making of itself a form in which myth and struggle may be once more lived.

Apart from linking the local dance to an aesthetic pedigree (never mind Carl Jung, Maud Bodkin and archetypal patterns in mythology), there would be a very practical reason for applauding the *Filipinesca* concept of the dance.

Up till now, the problem seems to be that the folk dance, if it is to remain identifiable as folk dance, must strive for authenticity. On this premise, it must eventually find expression in a number of variations that is not without limit. In effect, the folk dance shares the fate of the blue blood: unless it enters into morganatic marriage with some other indigenous principle (say, the legends of a people), it must artistically suffer a vigor-sapping inbreeding.

What we now underscore are the possibilities which Filipinescas offers towards the development in this country of professionalism in the dance. So far, our most successful dancers have been amateurs—the university groups that have made headlines around the world. After graduation, many of these talented young men and women disappear into physical-education faculties, if not into other ways of answering the primary needs of home economics: the dancing job that pays is virtually non-existent, and where it exists, it is something other than art. Besides, we cannot go on multiplying folk

dance troupes; and even were we all a race of tourists in our own country, we should soon tire of the same show year in, year out. Our talented dancers, therefore, excellent as amateurs, never become professionals.

On the other hand, our ballet schools (some have survived in spite of recent difficulties) train squads of moppets for the painfully arid repertoires of one or two companies that will stage one-night performances, often for charity. The professional future of dancers in this country cannot therefore be anything else but bleak, unless somebody comes up with bright answers.

It is Filipinescas that seems to be making the first imaginative stab at solving the problem. With the raw material of myth, history, and fiction, it should be able to tap local dance forms for another Appalachian (or should we say Cordillera?) Spring; it should be able to send local dancers on another Errand into the Maze; it should, with its dedication to an art at once Filipino and universal in its origins, resolve some of the prim objections to the ballet.

For Mrs. Goquingco: applause, indeed.

MUSIC

An embarrassed lull ordinarily settles on Manila's world of music when its symphony organizations (three active, by last count), having stashed away their instruments in October, sound nary an orchestrated peep till July in the following season. Into this quiet interim sometimes step impresarios like Alfredo Lozano and organizations like the American National Theatre and Academy, as they both did on 24th November last year when they brought to St. Cecilia's Hall the piano music of Rudolf Serkin. Because the experience of listening to performances by great musicians is always unforgettable, Manila music lovers savored the memory of the Serkin recital far into 1961 (his interpretation of Beethoven's "Waldstein" Sonata milked the piece of all its romantic tumult and power). In April, however, a new organization, the Philippine-American Cultural Foundation, focused the attention of Manilans onalas—a one-night performance of the Juilliard String Quartet

in the auditorium of the Ateneo de Manila. The Juilliards brought with them a magnificent part of their repertoire: they played Mozart's "Dissonant" Quartet in C Major, Piston's Quartet No. 1, and Schubert's Death and the Maiden. It is not possible to describe the quartet's music without wearying the reader with superlatives, but perhaps the extent to which the audience and even the most blasé critics were impressed can be measured in the words of The Manila Times's Rodrigo Perez III:

... we found ourselves wishing that the Juilliards would play just one tiny false note to assure us that we were listening to fellow-earthlings rather than to visitors from another dimension. Rarely and indeed only in miraculous instances in this country does one hear such grace and precision, technique so clean cut, and interpretation so superbly civilized . . .

Breaking the lull, too, were the excellent recitals of Gerd Kaemper, and Aurelio Estanislao. The German pianist must have been captivated by Manila during his visit last year, for he returned not only to play some more, but to pass on his technique, and share his genius with classes in the pianoforte at St. Scholastica's College. The superb singing of Aurelio Estanislao needs no recommendation, of course, to those who have heard the voice that the German press once referred to as belonging to "a second Fischer-Dieskau".

There also was a re-staging of the opera Noli Me Tángere, adapted from the novel by José Rizal. It broke the lull in a slightly different manner: as a production, it was a successful flag-waver, although there were those among the audience who noted, in spite of the best patriotic sentiments, that something more than the flag wavered.

At the time of writing, news reaches us concerning coming musical events:

The Manila Symphony Society will mark the Rizal Centennial by presenting Beethoven's Ninth Symphony ("The Choral"). It will seek to make known the cultural ties between the poet Friedrich Schiller (whose An die Freude is set to music in the fourth movement of the Ninth) and our national hero.

Prof. Carlos Quirino of the Ateneo de Manila's history department will read his paper on the subject as part of the presentation, and Mr. Narciso Pimentel Jr. will recite Rizal's Tagalog translation of Stauffacher's oration and the *Ruetli Schwur* from Schiller's Wilhelm Tell. The premiere performance will be held at the new Philippine-American Life auditorium, about whose splendid acoustics many Manilans have already heard.

The Harvard Glee Club will serenade Manila late in July (also at the Philippine-American Life auditorium).

With the return of the Zippers, the Manila Symphony Society will re-stage Johann Strauss's *Die Fledermaus* in August; and in September, it will produce for the first time a Tagalog *Gianni Schichi* under the equally improbable title *Juancho Gancho*.

PAINTING AND SCULPTURE

The first semester of 1961 has been outstanding for both the number and the quality of the exhibits put on by the many galleries in and around Manila. Since the last six months represent a banner period during which one-man shows, group shows and retrospectives vied with one another for more than passing attention, a catalogue of these shows, arranged according to the sponsoring gallery and annotated by Emmanuel S. Torres (curator of the Ateneo Art Gallery and convenient vade mecum to many an art show) may be the best way of presenting a more or less comprehensive picture of what is recent in Philippine painting.

The listing of art shows from January to July follows.

At the Luz Gallery:

Fernando Zobel de Ayala (January): Black and white calligraphic paintings and drawings. Austere, dramatic compositions, characterized by sharp strokes of black (applied by syringe), spatial rhythms, dynamic movement, subtle baroque forms, and equally subtle linear and tonal balances and tensions. Influence of Zen sumi paintings and the ascetic "grey" school of the young abstract expressionists of Madrid may be

felt in these latest of Zóbel's canvases. The exhibit was a near sell-out.

Group Show (February): Mostly paintings and sculpture by such diverse artists as Fernando Zóbel, Hernando Ocampo, Ang Kiokuk, Arturo Rogerio Luz, Lee Aguinaldo, José Joya, César Legaspi, Galo B. Ocampo, Barbara and Robert Ebersole, Roberta Schneidman, and others. Very uneven in quality, but four definitely stood out, viz. Fernando Zóbel, Galo B. Ocampo, Lee Aguinaldo, and José Joya.

Bernard Childs (March): A powerful print show of calligraphic etchings and engravings that were as vigorous as they were colorful. Sales: zero.

ROBERTO CHABET RODRIGUEZ (April): Undoubtedly the art find of the year. Works on exhibit included watercolors and gouaches on chipboards. Of Rodríguez, critic Torres has written in *The Manila Times*:

A pervading consistency of style and technical excellence indicates that here we have somebody who knows what he wants to say and says it without leaving a hint of hesitation, with a minimum of muddle . . . His paintings are largely variations on two themes: accordion tows of shanties or buildings and angular seated figures . . . rhythmic arrangements of simplified geometric forms (squares, rectangles, circles) . . .

Rodriguez did exceptionally well for a beginner not only as far as his sales went (P2,600) but also, and more importantly, as far as winning unanimous critical acclaim. At press time, the Art Association of the Philippines has announced that it was awarding first prize to this young painter whose works are to be included in the association's annual exhibit.

JUVENAL SANSÓ (May): Nineteen etchings. Writing for The Philippines Herald, Torres had this to say of the show:

Unlike most free-wheeling abstractionists, Sanso respects physical reality and goes after it with the zeal of a Renaissance draftsman... What is likely to arrest the attention of many in this exhibit is a group of bleak, gray, forbidding landscapes, some of which are among the best prints on view. They reveal an imagination that is at once fantastic, allegorical, austere, dramatic, ironic, and classical.

Two portraits are especially good examples of Sansó's intellectual toughness and gift for satire. Sanso's prints are represented in the private collections of such internationally famous figures as Jean Cocteau, Dunoyer de Segonzac, John P. Marquand, and Elsa Schiaparelli. Sales: very good.

Two Japanese Print Shows: Nippan & Sosaku Hangga (June): Two big print groups made up this splendid show of etchings, lithographs, woodcuts and serigraphs. Represented were the following big names in Japanese art: Saito, Sasajima, Onchi, Mabuchi, Azechi, Yamaguchi, and Sekino.

At the Contemporary Arts Gallery (presented by Enrique Velasco):

Associated American Artists (March): Etchings, lithographs and woodcuts by Archipenko, Peter Takal, Robert Cariola, Harold Altman, Fletcher Martin and Mervin Jules. Many of the prints are characterized by competent craftsmanship and a soft lyricism that alternates between nostalgia and Weltschmerz. Almost all in black and white, the prints vary from semi-representational to figures to landscape.

Georges Rouault (April): In the field of prints, this was certainly the event of the year. Some fifty or more lithographs, aquatints, and etchings—all of top quality—served to display the master's dramatic, ecstatic, compassionate, angry, spiritual commitment. Among the best were the pictures in the *Miserere* series.

Lucien Pan (May): A Sunday painter turned pro. Pan's calligraphic drawings attracted attention whereas his experiments with color invited the curious to ask questions. Sales: slow.

At the Ateneo Art Gallery:

ARTURO ROCERIO LUZ RETROSPECTIVE (January to February): Some 28 paintings (mostly in tempera and oil), many drawings and sketches, and one sculpture. A significant event, the exhibit, through highly select pieces, represented various phases of the artist's development. All of Luz's AAP prize-

winners were included in the show which covered the ten-year period from 1950 to 1960. Torres, who prepared the show, footnoted the collection:

A roomful of Luz paintings reveals at once the two distinct marks of the painter: an ascetic disciplined craft and a mandarin sensibility. To describe a Luz composition is to mention his architectural or structural organization of shapes and tight linear forms, limited palette range, subdued yet iridescent coloring heightened by a fine scumbling and pebbled texture, subtle handling of area and tone relationships, and impeccably neat execution. To describe the experience one gets out of a Luz painting is to mention the beauty of a neatly thought-out design and the quiet pleasure that distilled clarity, formal order and balance, and the meditation of resolved tensions can bring about. It is an art of understatement, in which less is more.

Mostly figurative compositions, the Luz frames included his first-prize "Processions" (1955), several cityscapes, (1957-1959), and his Vienna chair series (1959).

THE ATENEO GRADE SCHOOL GROUP SHOW (March): brave—and successful!—effort to harness the imagination of graders in knee-pants, this show uncovered what might someday prove to be genuine talent (as in the case of the young Ernesto Escaler). Many of the pictures—watercolors and "encaustic" wax-showed a surprisingly good amount of colorsense as well as of familiarity with the principles of composi-There were also a very few that were little more than the private Rohrschach profiles of growing boys. To those who took part in the show, much praise is indeed due, but special congratulations should go to the Rev. Luis Candelaria, S.J., headmaster of the Ateneo Grade School, and to Mrs. Virginia Agbayani, art instructress of the exhibitors—the one for sponsoring such a worthy project and giving it its initial push, the other for demonstrating that such headlong efforts can be rewarding.

In sculpture, there has been, as usual, hardly anything. Monti's allegorical statues, set up for the 1953 International Fair and given at the time a bath of gold paint to lend the figures a bogus bronze-look, stand today like leprous Titans, their counterfeit color beginning to peel off in the tall, uncut crabgrass of the United Nations plaza.

In Calamba, a new Rizal statue was unveiled on 19th June. The hero is depicted wearing a barong, an article of haberdashery which in our own time has come to be considered a badge of nationalism. It is common knowledge, however, that in Spanish times, indios were made to wear it as a mark of indignity. One is therefore led to doubt the historical truth of this item's being a part of Rizal's chosen wardrobe, as one also wonders whether there is a valid artistic reason for imposing contemporary ideas of sartorial correctness on a man now entirely incapable of defending himself from the good intentions of latter-day nationalists.

A Tolentino retrospective is promised for the latter half of this year.

THEATRE

"Drama in the Philippines," says Rolando S. Tinio (whose experimental production of Oedipus Rex on the Ateneo stage last December drew enthusiastic critical huzzahs and lean audiences), "is nothing more than the recreational activity of actors and producers indulged in at the expense of the spectators." He thus adds one more voice to the growing rumble of impatience at the absence of a legitimate, professional theatre in the country. And we may as well face it: drama is not a remunerative occupation here. If it were, it would cease to be recreation. It would put a well-deserved end, furthermore, to the tedious string of wretched play productions that claim immunity from the censure of critics on the brazen plea that, after all, those who present them are self-sacrificing laborers of This universal excuse has been so insistently theatre-love. urged upon reviewers in the past that it has now become less difficult to disagree with the view (again quoted from Tinio) that "the stagnation of the theatre arts results from incompetence, not on the part of the audience, as the artists would have it, but of the artists themselves."

Whatever the reason, we continue to be plagued by productions that range from the mediocre to the impossibly bad. There are, to be sure, times when good plays, good acting, and imaginative staging conspire to make a dazzling success of one,

two, or three nights, leaving an afterglow which persists in the memory of a grateful audience, even if that glow is seldom long enough to warrant continued appearances of the same play on the same stage or on the road. Such times are always welcome, but nothing really new seems to have brightened the firmament of the drama in the half-year just past, unless of course one can detect a ray of hope in fresh and determined efforts to move towards genuine professionalization.

The Tambuli Playhouse, organized early this year by J. Antonio Carrión, avowedly attempts such a move. It will have a theatre all its own in some unpretentious hall on R. Hidalgo street, and it will present plays weekly, whether a respectably sized audience is present or not. The optimism of the new organization is inspiring, but Lamberto V. Avellana, a veteran of the theatre struggle, warns against hopes that may have more altitude than base. Speaking before Tambuli members in one of the monthly lectures that the plsyhouse sponsors, he said that unless a company is ready to give its performers tolerable wages, the theatre may not expect dedication of the type seen behind the scenes in Broadway. And without such a company, Tambuli may discover someday that it has become just another nursery for budding Thespians who must graduate into a heart-breaking void.

The spirit in which Tambuli members took this cautionary allocution is admirable: possibly, they were not thinking of Broadway, but (remembering that Mme. von Furstenberg came once to a meeting) of Stuttgart, or Weimar, or—not to be insular—of the *Vieux Colombier*, and, more modestly, of even the Washington Square Players of José Quintero.

We turn from play groups to productions. This is perhaps not the place to discuss a motion picture, but this survey would be less than complete were we to ignore the film version of Rizal's Noli Me Tángere. To begin with, there is much to the film that recommends itself as a work of art. If, for instance, we can excuse a small number of overexposed strips, we find that, compositionally, the black-and-white photography is excellent. The clever transitions (e.g., the segue from two viragos locked

in mortal combat to a close-up of the principals in a tupada; or, the use of a melody line to contrast Maria Clara's saeta with the lamentation of Sisa) exploit fully both comic and tragic possibilities whenever a particular scene calls for either. This is done with such good taste that where melodrama could very easily have resulted, what appears on the screen is instead an intensification of the ups and downs of life.

The acting, too, is on the whole commendable. We were particularly touched by the reading given the role of Basilio. Fred Gonzales's Filosofo Tacio is close to being memorable, and the wife of the alférez turns one's stomach at the right times in the right places. We cannot agree, however, with those who hold—and we have met many—that Johnny Monteiro's Fray Salvi is an accurate reading of the villain's character. What was brought to the screen, it seems to us, was a caricature rather than a personification of the schemer: in some instances, the tyrant of San Diego behaved more like the village idiot. But perhaps this was an intended attempt to present the villain as a schizophrenic (a logical interpretation, and an imaginative one!), in which case the clash of psyches within the personality might have been made clearer.

Another reading with which we take issue is that of the character of Rizal's unforgettable epitome of affectation: Doña Victorina de Espadaña. In the movie, she is quite recognizable as the parvenu, but probably because of the script, the role could only be burlesqued, not acted.

This is not the case with the reading given Fray Damaso. Oscar Keese's friar is human even in his inhumanity; therefore, as well an object of shame as of pity; therefore, entirely believable.

What is, however, probably the great success of the film as a work of art is its ability to communicate a feeling for the period. No doubt, this is due to the educated taste of the painter, Carlos V. Francisco, the film's art consultant. One merely has to let an intelligent eye wander through any scene, and he can surprise himself with the discovery of mementoes from a bygone day: the baroque family shrine laden with its brocaded santos; a Malantik on the wall; a pile of fin-de-siècle beer bottles that now look curiously sanitary; and, in the opulent home of Capitán Tiago, even an "art nouveau" divan—all the rage in the last decade of 19th century Europe, and presumably, also in our imitative Filipinas.

Apart from the artifacts, there were the splendid houses with their ground-floor stables, their sweeping staircases, their mother-of-pearl windows, and their airy salas festooned heavily with what has now come to be known (after Torres) as cornucopia décor.

The elegant dress of the period is faithfully duplicated, as are the period's equally elegant manners. (The deceptive coyness of the young Filipina perhaps transcends the centuries, but in 19th century trappings, it becomes invitingly intriguing).

All this praise does not imply that the picture is free from anachronisms and other mistakes that could easily have been avoided. For a brief and unnecessary interval, the new Manila Cathedral (1959) rears its Italianate bulk across the screen. In another scene, while squeezing into the *cwartel* during a prison break, *Elias* is unaware that the tall, white tower of the Manila City Hall (1939) is peeping from behind his unsuspecting back.

Gerardo de Leon, who directed the picture for Bayanihan-Arriva, could also have enlisted an adviser on the rubrics and other ceremonials of the Church: during a procession, there were censers and a baldacchino, but no Blessed Sacrament!

Too, there was the matter of the picture's length (close to four hours). A more sensible screenplay might have reduced the rhetoric in many scenes of confrontation without damage to either argument or continuity. Furthermore, in spots, the music seemed to emphasize the length of the feature without really helping the action along. But these are small faults in a picture that is artistically rewarding.

The religious and political significance of the production is, of course, a subject for other commentators to discuss, although it is quite obvious that while the secular government of Spain

is treated sympathetically, many ambiguous situations surrounding the clergy, as well as statements made by and of them, remain in need of proper exegesis and historical backgrounding. This need should have been foreseen, as it must now be answered if one is to be fair not only to clerics of other places, other times, but also to José Rizal himself.

Finally, one of the startling truths that the picture seems to have brought out from the novel is this: that the worst enemy of the downtrodden Filipino is the little Filipino who with a little authority, happens to be on top. But this is outside the province of art.

ANTONIO G. MANUUD