

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Squatters:

The World Is An Apple and Other Prize Plays

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Philippine Studies vol. 8, no. 2 (1960): 453—458

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Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

can now look forward to numerous similar studies on Philippine and other South East Asian areas as the fruit of the wide-ranging recent anthropological field work reaches print.

T. R. McHALE

SQUATTERS

THE WORLD IS AN APPLE AND OTHER PRIZE PLAYS. By Alberto S. Florentino. Manila: Philippine Cultural Publishers. 1959. 107p.

I have never met Mr. Florentino. But I have a letter from him, dated 12 March 1960, and I think he will not object if I take the liberty of quoting two paragraphs from it:

"I know I shouldn't be writing someone who is about to make an appraisal of my plays, but I need the help of a competent, unbiased critic who can clarify for the public and *for me* whether the plays I have written are (to quote someone) 'immoral per se'; whether my endings 'condone evil'; and whether or not they 'mention the name of God in vain'. Or whether (to quote some one else) 'they are a plea for justice' or even 'a prayer to God' (*Oli Impan*).

"I myself cannot say whether the charges of immorality and blasphemy are correct or not; I am too much involved to do that. All I can say is I never intended to write immoral, blasphemous plays. Now, as to whether, despite my good intentions, what came out were such kinds of plays, I cannot tell. It would take someone outside of me to find out and say so... I shall wait for your review and I shall hope you shall touch on these points."

That poses the question quite clearly and squarely, and I am glad that Mr. Florentino himself has posed it. I shall try to answer the question with equal frankness and lucidity, with the very important proviso, however, that it should be clearly understood that anything I say is my own private, personal opinion and carries no particular weight. What I say here or elsewhere on this or on any other subject is offered *salvo meliori judicio* — with deference to the judgment of others far more competent than I.

With this premised, let us take a look at Mr. Florentino's plays.

I first noticed Florentino's work when reviewing Mrs. Jean Edades' *More Short Plays of the Philippines*. That review, which appeared in these pages in June 1958, contains the following statement: "Two plays in this collection seem especially powerful: 'The World is an Apple' and 'Cadaver,' both by Alberto S. Florentino, who, at the time

of publication, was a student in the University of the East. That writer is worth watching. He has considerable talent."

I am glad to find that I was not alone in that opinion. Mr. Florentino has lately received praise from good critics, including Alejandro R. Roces (*The Manila Times*, 28 Dec. 1959), Rosalinda Orosa (*Manila Chronicle*, 6 Jan. 1960), Pura Santillan-Castrencia (*The Manila Daily Bulletin*, 25 Jan. 1960), and Severino Montano in the foreword to the booklet (November 1959).

On the other hand, as the letter quoted above indicates, there are those who condemn the plays in no uncertain terms as "immoral" and "blasphemous". There is no question therefore that we are dealing here with plays which tend to provoke contrary reactions in their readers.

The small volume under review contains five short plays. The first, *The World is an Apple*, received first prize in the Palanca Awards for 1954. The second, *Cadaver*, was given honorable mention that same year. The third, *The Dancers*, received second prize in 1957. The remaining two, *Cavort with Angels* and *Oli Impan*, were awarded prizes in the Arena competition for 1959.

All five plays have a similar theme: the terrible life of the people in the slums. "After the liberation of Manila," says the introduction to the fifth play, "hundreds of indigent families settled in the squalid cramped space of the bombed ruins of an old government building on Juan Luna. For more than a decade, these 'squatters' tenaciously refused to move out in spite of court rulings. The 'Casbah', as the compound was popularly known, became a breeding place for vice and corruption. The city government was able to evict the 'squatters' only on December 20, 1958—five days before Christmas."

These plays are about people in the "Casbah", or in the squatter areas of Intramuros, people who have no money and no decent means of livelihood. One of the plays is about a couple who are so desperately poor that they have to live in a shack constructed among the tombs in the cemetery; and, as one might guess, they live by robbing the dead. Others rob the living. And others live by prostitution.

These plays, therefore, have an ugly setting, for they deal with the facts of life in the slums; and in the slums, the facts of life are ugly.

The point that these plays emphasize is the fact that the inhabitants of the slums, no matter how degraded they may be in themselves and no matter how degrading their environment, are nevertheless *people*. They are men and women with human feelings and human thoughts, and some of them still cling to their ideals. They too have souls to save, and it is in their power to save them, although quite

often they seem to fail. They are possessed of free will, and those who fall, fall by their free choice. "Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell." Life in the squatter areas does not involve merely material misery, but moral misery as well.

Such people, battling for life in such harsh surroundings, are not proper company for children or for adolescents—and therefore I would not recommend these plays for children in the grades or for the boys and girls in the secondary schools. But on the other hand, the people in the slums are a legitimate subject for drama and for literature. They may not be pleasant people to live with; but they are people whom we must know. In class-conscious Manila, where society matrons pay several thousand pesos for an evening gown which they will wear only once, and where a 50-peso-a-plate dinner can draw a thousand guests, it might be well for people to get a glimpse of the grim existence of those who have no home but a *barong-barong* and who have no food but what they and their children can scavenge among the piles of refuse left to rot on the streets. The fact that such misery exists in Manila and its environs is a condemnation of our moral life and our social practice. Such misery should not exist. But the fact that such people do exist makes them a fit subject for literature.

To condemn a piece of writing as immoral because some of the characters in it are bad, would be to condemn Shakespeare because *Macbeth* was a murderer, or to condemn Dickens because the heroine of *Oliver Twist* was a prostitute. Everything depends on *how* such people or such scenes are depicted, and whether immorality—or an immoral principle—is condemned or condoned.

The fifth play in this volume is called *Oli Impan*, which is the Filipino child's way of pronouncing the English "Holy Infant." The scene is in the "Casbah," five days before Christmas in 1958. The city government has decided at last to destroy the squatters' hovels and eject them from government land. The play consists of a dialogue between two children—a girl and a boy—who could not understand why their hovels are being destroyed. Ordinarily, when houses are destroyed, it is to prevent a fire from spreading—but now there is no fire. Moreover, they cannot understand why the policemen are arresting not those who are destroying their dwellings but those who are trying to prevent their destruction. Not being able to understand any of these things, the children decide to sing—as children often do; and since it is only five days to Christmas, they sing a Christmas carol that the little boy has learned from his mother. They do not know that it is a Christmas carol. They do not understand the words. The words of course are "Silent night, holy night! All is calm, all is bright, Round yon Virgin Mother and Child, Holy Infant so tender and mild." But the children pronounce them as: "Saylenay, Olinay, Oliskam, Olisbray, Ranyonherginmaderenchayl, Oliimpan..."

"What do the words mean?" asks the little girl. "I don't know," answers the little boy. He adds, "I think it's about God."

"What's God?"

"I don't know. I haven't asked my mother. But she told me God was born in a stable."

"What's a stable?"

"A place for horses."

"He was born there? In a place for horses? Why?"

"My mother said He had nowhere to stay."

"Was He poor?"

"I don't know."

The pathos of that passage is by no means lessened by the fact that this boy learns this song about "God in a stable" from his mother—who is a bad woman. We learn this fact from the child himself, who gives us the information in all innocence, without realizing its implications:

BOY. My mother has a job.

GIRL. What does she do?

BOY. She reads hands.

GIRL. She reads—*hands*?

BOY. That's what she told me.

GIRL. Why does she read hands?

BOY. So she can tell what will happen tomorrow.

GIRL. She can do that? By reading hands?

BOY. Yes, she can.

GIRL. Can she read my hands? I want to know where we shall stay tomorrow.

BOP. She can't read your hands.

GIRL. Why not?

BOY. They're too small—and dirty. Besides, she reads only men's hands.

GIRL. Only men's hands? Why?

BOY. I don't know.

GIRL. You don't know? Don't you watch her?

BOY. No, I don't.

GIRL. Why not?

BOY. My mother won't let me. She makes me go out and play. And she closes the door.

GIRL. How can she read in the dark?

BOY. I don't know. But she can!

Remarkably enough, there are beautiful characters in this ugly world of hunger, penury and vice. In *The World is an Apple*, a good wife tries to prevent her husband from resuming his life of crime; she would rather starve than live on stolen money. In *Cadaver*, the wife does not realize that her husband has been robbing the tombs and is horrified at the information. In *The Dancers*, a good mother and a good son fight a bitter battle to prevent an evil father from selling his daughters into prostitution. The fourth play, *Carvort with Angels*, is a terrible play. It is about two sisters who live in a miserable room. It is quite obvious how they make their living. One of them loathes her evil life and tries to mend it but her sister prevents her, and her own naive belief in the goodness of people brings a terrible disillusionment. She ends by taking her life.

If this last-mentioned play implied an approval of the thesis that life is hopeless and that the only solution to its problems is suicide, the play would be immoral. But this does not seem to be the case in the play in question.

Because of their subject matter, these plays (as I have said) are not proper for young people. After all, we do try to protect our children and adolescents not only from evil, but even from unpleasant things. But on the other hand, these plays do not seem to me to be immoral. Mr. Florentino has looked squarely at life in the slums. He tells us what he has found there. He has found Good battling with Evil, and the Good is often handicapped in such surroundings. He has told us the truth. He has told it with restraint; he has not soiled his lips or his mind in the telling, and I do not believe that he is likely to soil ours. Mr. Florentino's plays are not "immoral," and they are not "blasphemous."

Of course, the facts of life in the slums being harsh, I can understand why a director may prefer not to stage these plays, or a theatergoer may prefer not to see them. But if he condemns the plays, he should condemn them as unpleasant or harrowing or perhaps unsettling, but not as immoral or blasphemous.

It should be pointed out, however, that while each individual play may not be objectionable from a moral point of view, the impression of all of them together may be quite unhealthy, and may give rise to a certain pessimism about life itself, as though evil were bound to win and goodness doomed to failure. No dramatist can afford to give such an impression as the total effect of his work. For a dramatist must tell the truth, and the truth is the whole truth, not

just a portion of it which may tend to give a distorted picture of the whole of reality.

Life, after all, is beautiful—not in a saccharine sense, but in the sense that granite is beautiful, or that fire is beautiful, or even pain, when suffered gladly, is beautiful. Life may be harsh, but it is worth living. Though truth may not always prevail, it is worth while to fight for it. And though goodness may often fail, it is better to be good and fail, than to be successful and evil. For success and failure are, in the last analysis, irrelevant accidents; but to *be* good or to *be* evil is of the essence of life and seals one's fate for all eternity. Eternity itself is part of the truth. And God is all-powerful, even in the slums.

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

FILIPINOS ABROAD

THE BAMBOO DANCERS. A novel by N.V.M. Gonzalez. Quezon City: The Diliman Review, 1959. 277p.

The "bamboo dancers" of the title is an allusion to the *tinikling*, that spectacular folk dance in which the dancers—with some risk to limb if not to life — hop in and out between two bamboo poles clapped together in rhythm. Of all Philippine folk dances this one is the best known abroad, its popularity enhanced by the recent tour in Europe and America of the Far Eastern University Dance Group and of the *Bayanihan* of the Philippine Women's University. Professor Gonzalez has given the term a symbolic connotation by applying it both to the actual *tinikling* dancers who hop in and out of the book, and to Filipinos abroad generally, especially those in the United States, who are the subject of the novel.

As portrayed in the book such Filipinos are not always admirable. The hero of the story is a sculptor who goes to the United States on a fellowship grant and there renews acquaintance with an old Manila friend, a young lady who is also in the United States on a writers' fellowship. Together they spend a week in New York, in the clandestine privacy of a borrowed apartment. The young lady, having suffered a moral lapse with the sculptor in question, agrees to marry him, only to change her mind later and to become engaged to a young American writer, Herb Lane, who is interested in the Far East and joins the USIS. On their way home to the Philippines where they are to get married, Lane dies in Taipeh, and she is brought to the hospital with an "obstetric difficulty" — apparently a blood clot. The sculptor's brother meanwhile is in California, a resident physician in a hospital. He has left his wife and child in Manila, and takes an extracurricular interest in an "American blonde,"