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## **Nick Joaquin's "Portrait"** **I. Roots, Sunlight and Rain**

Miguel A. Bernad

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## Notes and Comment

### Nick Joaquin's "Portrait"

WHEN on 11 August 1956 the Barangay Theater Guild left the ruins of Intramuros and presented Nick Joaquin's *Portrait of the Artist as Filipino* in the air-conditioned comfort of the Law Auditorium of the Ateneo de Manila, it was the 46th performance of that much discussed play. That in itself is significant. More significant however than the popularity of the play is its message: the past is valuable, the present worthless.

Nick Joaquin is one of the more important writers in the Philippines today. This Quarterly has already published two studies on his work: one on his short stories by Father Harry B. Furay (I:144-154), the other on the dominance of the Spanish tradition in his work by Lourdes Busuego Pablo (III: 187-207). Because of the widespread interest in his *Portrait* we have asked three critics to review the play in this issue—three critics who have not yet said anything in print about it. The first review is by Father James B. Reuter S.J., Moderator of Dramatics at the Ateneo de Manila and member of the President's Committee for a National Theater. The second is by Miss Gloria Castro and the third by Miss Maria Aurora Malvar, both of whom are instructors of English at the Assumption College. — *Editor*.

### I. Roots, Sunlight And Rain

Daisy Hontiveros Avellana is the outstanding young woman in Filipino theater, and she has done a very good job as Candida

in Nick Joaquin's *Portrait of the Artist as Filipino*. Mrs. Avellana is the heart of the Barangay Theater Guild, the bravest of the amateur theatrical groups in the Philippines.

Strangely enough the Philippines has no legitimate professional theater. In this we are unique among the nations. Actors flourish everywhere but here. Professional theaters blossom like mushrooms in the United States; they are traditional in England, Ireland, France; they are popular even in China and Japan. But there is no building from Aparri to Jolo which is devoted solely to stage productions. We have no professional players, no professional playwrights, no producers, and therefore no directors, no designers, no technicians. There is no one in the country who works at drama for a living. Whatever plays we have are prepared after working hours; and they are presented, essentially, for fun.

Theater in the Philippines, today is confined to the schools, to amateur groups like the Manila Theater Guild, and to semi-professional companies like Narciso Pimentel's Dramatic Philippines. And even Dramatic Philippines, which is professional on radio, is amateur on stage—in the sense that their stage productions are occasional and draw their crowds because of something extrinsic to the theater. The appeal of the Passion Play is not dramatic; it is religious. *Kwentong Kochero*, on stage, is the personal appearance of popular radio stars. Claro Recto's Spanish drama, translated into Tagalog as *Nag-iisa Sa Karimlan*, drew an audience because it was written by a well-known Senator.

Under these circumstances, when theater audiences are composed almost exclusively of friends and relations and fond mothers who come to see their children, and when the best of plays can not run more than a week, the amateur group that ventures onto the boards is very brave indeed. The Barangay has been doing this for years. Or, more precisely, Daisy Hontiveros Avellana has been doing this for years, dragging her troupe behind her. She has tried Shakespeare, Euripides, Maxwell Williams—all excellent scripts, sensitive casts, imaginative productions—everything except an audience.

And then came Nick Joaquin who touched a nerve. He has grown up out of local soil and Filipinos like what he writes because it is close to home. His play ran through 45 performances. This would be a shameful failure in New York City where a good play

runs for eight years but this is not New York City. Here 45 performances is a claim to glory. It almost makes Nick Joaquin the outstanding playwright in the Philippines.

The story centers on a house in Intramuros and on two old maids who are unwilling to leave it. The old maids have a father who is a painter. He has painted a strange picture—he himself as a young man carrying himself as an old man out of a burning city. It is faintly reminiscent of Aeneas carrying the old Anchises out of the flames of Troy.

Dramatically the presentation of this picture is excellent. It is supposed to be hanging on the fourth wall of the room on the side of the audience, which has been taken out so that you can see the play. So there is no picture. All the actors stand looking up at it and the mind paints the portrait.

The play is the struggle of the two old maids to hold on to the house, to hold on to the picture, to hold on to the past. The villains in the piece are a brother and sister who want to sell the house and the picture because they hate the past and are afraid of it. Throughout the play a shadow falls across the stage, the shadow of a man who never appears—a rich American who is trying to buy the picture for money.

Nick Joaquin loves the past. It is his first love, his life, his bread and butter, his rice and fish. If there were no past to write about, he would probably stop writing. And he is peculiarly fitted to write about the past. His mind is like a haunted house. In his stories the action floats, wraith-like, from past to present to past—with the past much more vivid than the present. His settings abound in shadows, cobwebs and mirrors. Characters float in and out the centuries. But the ghosts are not the men and women who lived two hundred years ago: *they* are real; *they* throb with passion. *We* are the ghosts. They are colorful and we are pale; they are rich and deep, they are living, loving, laughing; we are the empty echo.

That is the message of the play: "Do not give up the past; all that is beautiful and good, all our treasure lies there. Stand with the past, against the world." The narrator of this story who is Nick Joaquin himself says at the end of it: "I will remember and I will sing. That is my vocation."

In its first performances, in the ruins of Intramuros, Lamberto Avellana put the narrator high on the jagged wall, in the

wind, with his thoughts recorded. The scene was realistic: a sala in an ancient Spanish home.

Mrs. Avellana plays one of the old maids. A very virile actress, she has never been happy in soft scenes. In this story Candida is a strong character who is constantly trapped in emotional situations, though she wants desperately not to betray emotion. In portraying this woman all her years of experience, all the dreary days of directing schoolgirls, all the long nights of recording for radio, all the varied parts she has played, came to the aid of Mrs. Avellana; and in this role she scored. The character of Candida was revealed slowly, almost imperceptibly, through a thousand small nuances: in the clipped word, in the hopeless gesture, in the cast of her shoulders, in the determined step, in the tilt of her head, in the tension of her hands. Daisy Hontiveros Avellana laughed and cried very well but it was not her big scenes that made her acting great; it was the steady portrayal of Candida—an unhappy, courageous, lonely woman.

Yet, as the play is written, Mrs. Avellana should not have been the star. As the play is written, her role is number three. The star should have been Paula or Tony Javier. But Mrs. Avellana did with this role what Marlon Brando did with Mark Antony—she stole the play with it—and when the curtain comes down the character that stays in the mind is Candida.

She gets excellent support. Armando Goyena is the worthless, mercenary, amoral piano player, Tony Javier. His acting was vigorous and colorful. But he did not portray the ugliness of Tony Javier. This character in the play is a lying, profligate, treacherous animal who has grown up in the gutter. Armando Goyena is at the moment a lovable, popular screen star. In this play he makes Javier lovable. There is nothing of Judas in Goyena's portrayal; he is all Saint John. The iniquity of Javier is unconvincing when Armando Goyena smiles. He has none of the hungry, hang-dog, furtive look of a man who lives by his wits. He looks too good, too successful, too happy, too innocent for that role. If Lamberto Avellana, the director, had someone else in that part, Tony Javier would have stolen the play from Candida.

Miss Benavides as Paula was convincing; she lacks experience and, in the last scenes of the third act where she should have been ecstatic, she became slightly mechanical; but this would not have been noticed if she were not acting in such good company. Fran-

cisco Trinidad was splendid as the Senator. This part, we hear, is stolen from a real character in real life. Candida and Paula upbraid the poor Senator mercilessly, throwing into his teeth his crime of abandoning poetry for pesos; but as Trinidad plays the role the Senator seems understandable, genuine, attractive.

Sarah Joaquin was the wicked old witch and Nick Agudo the big bad brother. The pace picked up when Alfred Burgos and Oscar Keese stepped on the stage. These four are intelligent actors, competent craftsmen, who are humble enough to play small parts. In any production the bit-players invest as much time and as much energy as the stars and they make or break the play. As long as the Barangay has actors like Burgos and Keese, like Sarah Joaquin and Nick Agudo, it will command respect, with or without success in the box office.

The production is so good that when the play is over your mind is filled with the thesis: "*Hold on to the past.*" And the thesis is true: our roots are in the past, like the roots of a tree, and we should not cut them off. But a tree also lives on sunlight and rain—this morning's sunlight and the rain that is falling now. If we lived only on our heritage, we would not grow. Our roots are in the culture of Spain but America has been with us for half a century and our modern Christian Filipino culture is all around us like the sunlight and the rain. We should love the past, it is true. But we should also love the present and the future. All our glory is not behind us; we still have today and tomorrow.

JAMES B. REUTER

## II. Distinguished And Filipino

It is perhaps safe to assume that no other contemporary Filipino dramatist has yet produced a piece that has the depth and eloquence of Mr. Joaquin's *Portrait*.

In all good drama there is conflict. In this piece, the conflict lies in the two cultures that present-day Filipinos are heir to: the Spanish with its idealism and its faith; and the newer, western ways, which to the author signify materialism and progress,