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The Comedia (Moro-Moro) Rediscovered

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intuition into trouble that puts Espino in the good company of those who sing sweet songs, the songs about "saddest thought." Indeed, there is much sad thought in *Ritmo ng Lingkaw* – Rhythm of the Sickle. (Does it allude to an ideology, too?) But the dexterity of Espino's power with words plus a good amount of humor, often playful, sometimes biting, and cynical, always suggestive, makes his poetry very readable, even if at times it appears to be straining toward aphorism (a concession to the nativism represented by the proverb?).

The poems in the first two parts of the book do not make a book sublime nor a vision transcendent. They are a whimper in the twilight, a groan in a night illumined only by the silver sickle of a moon. They cry in the hope for a "banaag at sikat." *Ritmo ng Lingkaw* is a difficult rhythm: it is for bare nimble feet and calloused hands. It is good reading for everyone, too, though one needs to have read as widely as Espino to be able to savor fully his poetry.

Florentino H. Hornedo

THE COMEDIA (MORO-MORO) REDISCOVERED. By Dr. Felicidad Mendoza. Privately published, 1976. 310 pages.

The title of Part 2 of this book, "Notes and Memories of a Comedia Enthusiast," could well serve as subtitle for the book. Dr. Mendoza, a dentist, has long been associated with the *komedya*. She is from Parañaque, one of the few towns in Metro Manila where the *komedya* is still a living tradition. She has not only been a devotee of this theater form since childhood, but has directed presentations, written the much-performed *Prinsesa Perlita* as well as *komedyas* for children, and founded Kudyapi, Philippines, a *komedya* theater group. Her book is a compendium of her readings, experiences, thoughts, and findings on the *komedya* and some related forms.

Dr. Mendoza begins by gathering together various historical notes and conjecturing on the origin of the form. She starts with the 1637 play, *Gran comedia de la toma del Pueblo de Corralat y conquista del Cerro*, written by Jeronimo Perez, S.J. (and not by the Jesuit Provincial Juan de Salazar, as Dr. Mendoza and various other sources erroneously have it) to celebrate the victory of General Sebastian Hurtado de Corcuera over Cachil Corralat (Kudarat). This play is called by Retana the first *comedia* written in the country "con asunto filipino." Since, in Spanish drama, any three-act play in verse is called a *comedia*, one cannot conclude that this play, or the *comedias* mentioned by Morga and others, evolved directly into the Philippine *komedya*. The Perez play was about Filipino Moros and Spanish Christians; the *komedyas* are always about non-Filipino Moros and *Cristianos* in conflicts taking place in the European settings (real or imagined) of metrical romances.

This section of the book gathers together some useful information, but unfortunately does not organize this in some kind of historical progression or chronology. Nor does any other kind of organization or perspective govern the arrangement of data. Moreover, all sources — historical, popular, literary, journalistic, scholarly — are treated indiscriminately, without evaluation or cross-checking. Thus, the reader is not led in a definite direction or toward any kind of conclusion about the origin of the komedya. He can only gather some facts about its former and still occasional popularity.

The strength of the book lies in Dr. Mendoza's intimate knowledge of the komedya, a knowledge culled not from books, but from having had the komedya as part of her life, from having "served" it, so to speak, as audience, director, author, and now teacher and champion. This knowledge is scattered throughout Parts 1 and 2, which are divided haphazardly into chapters or sections, some only a few pages long. If one reads through patiently without demanding a system of organization, however, one is able to reap some sheaves of information that can later be bundled together into a more than adequate idea of the komedya as theater form.

With offhand familiarity and unflinching enthusiasm, Dr. Mendoza speaks of the plots: the warring kingdoms, their *embahadas*, *torneos*, and battles; the pairs of lovers whose problems are eventually solved by the "infidel's" conversion to Christianity. The theme of the *moro-moro* — "Love and Christianity are the only ways to Salvation" (p. 35) — is, Dr. Mendoza says, evidence of the missionary zeal of the friars. For the kingdom, although secular in subject matter, was in fact also an instrument of Christianization and colonization as were the religious plays (e.g., the *sinakulo*) of traditional Philippine theater.

One also learns of the standard *dramatis personae* of such a play, reflections of the definite images in the minds of the audience. Thus, kings were always authoritative and impressive; queens elegant yet able to evoke tears; sultans arrogant and bombastic; princesses beautiful and graceful, yet able to fight when necessary; princes handsome and valiant; clowns physically funny and loquacious in their irreverent adlibbing.

Dr. Mendoza writes of the language of the komedya (emotional, metaphorical), its versification (dodecasyllabic rhyming quatrains) and delivery (formerly chanted, now declaimed in a "raised stilted tone above that . . . natural to the performers" [p. 45]).

Especially interesting is the author's description of staging, from backyard rehearsals attended by a neighborhood audience, to fiesta stage, sometimes an elaborate structure of many levels, faced with elaborately woven bamboo. She describes the costumes, "color-cued" according to religious affiliation (black and other somber hues for the Christians; the red spectrum for the Moros); the *marchas*, *paso dobles* and *punebres* played by the band to accompany exits, entrances, and the elaborate marching figures of the *paseo*;

the stage conventions and movements like the *arnis* movements in the *batalya*, the *escaramosa* in which warriors waltz, weapons in hand, the miracles and magic effects that the audiences applaud so enthusiastically.

The major part of the book is devoted to discussions of the place of the komedya in the contemporary world. Feeling that the komedya of yore, which took several days to complete (several hours each day), needs to be updated for a modern audience, Dr. Mendoza espouses what she calls "the improved comedia," one not only shortened to the length of a three-act play, but also updated in subject matter. After all, Moro-Christian conflicts are not all of life, and emphasizing them only promotes a divisiveness that is already a national problem.

As an example of the improved form, Dr. Mendoza cites her own *Prinsesa Perlita* (text and English translation in Part 4), which is loosely based on Jose Corazon de Jesus' *Sa Dakong Silangan*. Here, the use of a narrator shortens playing time, and the subject matter, although still involving love and war, is an allegory relating to Philippine history. In the staging of the play (explained in detail in Part 4), Dr. Mendoza has used the traditional conventions, but borrowed from techniques of Western theater. The play and its staging have been the base of the activities of Kudyapi, Philippines, which has performed, taught, and established komedya chapters in schools, towns, army camps, and among out-of-school youth in and out of Metro Manila.

Dr. Mendoza ends by suggesting that positive efforts be made to preserve and propagate the komedya. Plays and old performers should be filmed or video-taped; a library and museum should be established; Parañaque should be made into a komedya center. She also suggests that scripts be translated into English for study by scholars. Since it is so difficult to capture the native sensibility (especially that of the florid, emotional *moro-moro*) in crisp English, we would suggest instead that scholars be encouraged and funded in their study of komedya in their different vernaculars, until such a time as all will have been studied, and can be put together (perhaps translated into Pilipino) to form a complete picture of the Philippine komedya.

The Comedia (Moro-Moro) Rediscovered is not a scholarly work, not a history. It has no footnotes or bibliography, no critical perspective or system or organization. What it is is a memoir: the random notes and thoughts of one passionately devoted to the komedya, one who has translated this passion into action, and devoted most of a lifetime to keeping alive this theater form in a time vastly different from that which saw its birth. The book has informational value, and should encourage scholars to do methodical research, theater buffs to watch komedya and learn what it was that enchanted millions some decades back, playwrights to update it for today, and directors to stage it in ways that would relate to an audience bred on Western theater and mass media.

Dr. Mendoza's work, the first book published on the komedya, is a

welcome addition to the as yet meager library of Philippine drama. As the saying goes, *Ang hindi marunong lumingon sa pinanggalingan, hindi makakarating sa paroroonan*. A portion of *ang pinanggalingan*, our theatrical past, has been partially treated by Dr. Mendoza's book. It makes a contribution to the total picture that the Filipino scholar is striving to complete which will link the past to present and future (*ang paroroonan*) Philippine theater.

Doreen G. Fernández

THE SANCHEZES OF OLD MANILA. By Melanie V. Talag. Manila: National Book Store, Inc., 1978. 410 pages.

The Sanchezes of Old Manila is a historical romance of Manila in the 1890s, focusing on the opium smuggling trade as the festering sore at the heart of colonial ills. Set against a realistic backdrop which reveals political, social, and economic forces inexorably moving toward 1896, the story revolves around Dadong Sanchez, the do-gooder scion of a wealthy *ilustrado* family, and his beautiful, headstrong sister, Isabel.

The book opens with the archetypal scene of the young man arriving home fresh from his studies abroad, and from here the plot quickly becomes complicated. Dadong is willy-nilly drawn into an underground campaign to flush out the opium smugglers and becomes secretly involved with some restive Tondo folk and their mounting grievances against the colonial system. Isabel drifts from a passionate, if unlikely, liaison with the family boatman, Carlos, to a loveless marriage to a dashing French doctor. In her determination to bail her brother out of prison, she is compelled to capitalize on her ample feminine charms, and very narrowly escapes the clutches of the lusty governor-general. Corruption, intrigue, conspiracy, human frailty, degradation, and heroism are the threads which the author weaves into her always lively tale.

It is apparent that Talag undertook considerable scholarly research for this, her first novel. Her keenest instinct is for authenticity of detail in setting, and the overwhelming characteristic of her work is its thorough historical texture. The port city of Manila, as it throbbed with the myriad concerns of its cosmopolitan population, and at the same time exuded the ominous spirit of the mysterious East, comes alive in the book. Scheming Spanish officials, worldly churchmen, abusive *guardia civil*, and greedy local businessmen, figure against a militant newspaper editor, a wily Chinese merchant, a spunky pastryshop-keeper, and a band of *indio* subversives in an explosive chain of events which evokes the tense pre-Revolution atmosphere. Above all, Old Manila as native city of the *ilustrado* and as quintessence of his pre-turn-of-the-century lifestyle is faithfully and vividly recreated. Not a single detail