

philippine studies

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

Palabas, by Fernandez

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Philippine Studies vol. 44, no. 3 (1996): 439–440

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008



Palabas: Essays on Philippine Theater History. By Doreen G. Fernandez. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1996.

It is never easy to be a scholar of Philippine drama. The history of the drama stretches over centuries to the precolonial past and continues to be produced in the different Philippine languages and in forms and styles equally various. Moreover, unlike fiction, the drama is not merely a written text but rather performance; protean and in many cases ephemeral. To study Philippine drama, then, requires energy, patience, money, and mobility. But Doreen G. Fernandez in *Palabas* shows us that the task, though daunting, is not impossible.

Palabas gathers together 15 essays written, read, or published between 1978 and 1995—all tackling the different “forms and times” of Philippine theater. The introductory essay, “From Ritual to Realism,” is probably the most comprehensive overview of Philippine drama one can read so far. Fernandez traces the development of Philippine drama from the songs and dances of the precolonial past, to the staged *komedya* and religious plays of the Spanish period, to the “seditious plays,” musicals, and prose plays in English and the vernaculars of the American years, to the multitude of forms—Epic theater, social realism, and psychological realism—of current times.

The essays under the heading “Stages of Development: Forms and Times,” the bulk of the book, explain in greater detail the forms mentioned in the introduction. Describing the “panoply of [indigenous] rituals, verbal play, songs and dances,” Fernandez fulfills what Rizal did not live to finish, that is, legitimize these practices, disqualified by Barrantes and Retana, as drama:

But then, is drama always a written play? Does it always need to be costumed, spoken, staged? . . . What then is it that is basic to drama, the bare minimum without which it cannot *be*, the element that distinguishes it from all other human activities? *Mimesis*, says Aristotle, the imitation of life. . . .

If then we do not demand of pre-Hispanic Filipinos the kind of dramatic activity that centuries of evolution had developed in Spain, but instead proceed to look for native forms of mimesis or mimetic action, then we would be using the proper approach in our search for Philippine indigenous theater (p. 31)

"The Jesuits and Early Theater" presents the special role of the religious order in propagating staged drama during the Spanish colonial period.

"Tradition and Revitalization of the Komedya" and "From Zarzuela to *Sarswela*" are interesting, for they describe the two rival forms in all their quaintness and continuing relevance. Formal conventions (of staging, line delivery, writing) are explained in the light of the world views, or systems of values, which these forms uphold, such as the equation of manhood with heroism and the relentless power of love.

The last four essays in the section assess contemporary drama. Fernandez explores the ingenuity of Filipino artists in overcoming boundaries of economy—by communal support, tradition—and of political repression—by allegory, indirection, use of historical and folk figures.

The section "In Close Focus: Texts and Performances" discusses three plays representing three dramatic forms—a *salubong*, a *komedya*, and a modern realist play. In her essays, Fernandez shows the creative text intertwined with contexts—personal, literary, and sociopolitical. In her discussion of the *komedya* "Princesa Miramar at Principe Leandro," for example, she notes that the staging—Muslim characters entering and exiting through one side of the stage painted red, Christians through the other side painted blue—reflects the traditional dichotomy between the two religious groups. However, she also points out that this dichotomy is "illusory . . . and temporary . . . [T]he differences between Moro and Christian are not ideological, but defined by externals—costume, baptism, stage manner—and easily dissolved" (p. 189).

The two essays in "Notes on Criticism" pose questions on studying Philippine drama and point out the paramount problem in Philippine criticism today: personalism. Drawing from Rodin and Henry James, Fernandez defines the role of the critic as an intermediary between playwright and audience, verily as a teacher of sorts:

The critic's duty is therefore primarily to the public rather than to the artist. When he or she says that the play that opened last night was good, he is not saying that to make the playwright feel good but to indicate to the public that the play is worth experiencing, worth buying a ticket for, and why (p. 219).

The appendices in the book are as valuable as the essays themselves. In one, Fernandez chronicles the important events from 1598 to 1995 in the history of Philippine theater—premieres of landmark productions, construction of theaters, publication of significant criticism, sociopolitical events which bear on drama. The other appendix is a list of some 250 plays, from *A Modern Filipina* to *An Maimbot na AQui*, from *Gran comedia de la toma del pueblo de Corralat y conquista del cerro to D.H.*, cited in the book—a lifetime of reading to some, and a testament to the wealth of Philippine drama and the breadth of Fernandez's scholarship.

Reading *Palabas*, one experiences, however vicariously, the joy and rigor of literary scholarship. Fernandez culls from ancient sources (the Spanish chronicles, letters, Retana, and Barrantes), from fellow scholars, teachers, and friends (Bienvenido Lumbera, Nicanor G. Tiongson) and from her own wealth of theater experiences—as reader, spectator, interviewer—to present a panorama of Philippine theater. One is impressed by the vast terrain mapped by the book, and is encouraged to explore regions yet uncharted—to retrieve and translate texts, to theorize on movements and forms, to produce criticism beyond the cursory review. *Palabas* makes engaging and instructive reading. Beautifully packaged, carefully researched, lucidly written, it is doubtless an invaluable addition to the canon of Philippine literary history. Indeed, it is itself a *palabas*—a showcase to delight and teach both the connoisseur and the curious.

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Noli Me Tangere. Translated by Soledad Lacson-Locsin. Edited by Raul L. Locsin. Manila: Bookmark, Inc., 1996.

A new book is always welcome. If it is a new translation of an old one—in our case, a classic, such as Jose Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*—expectations always naturally run high.

A translation is like a key that opens for us a door to a new experience. It is therefore an exaggeration to say like the old Latins, *Traductor traditor* (the translator is a traitor), for this ignores the labor of a translation. One has to be at home in both languages to express the same ideas in two different idioms, with a different syntax and spirit. And like the choice of clothes or of art, several translations of the same work cannot be compared, for here, we are now dealing with taste. Again as the Latins say, *De gustibus non disputatur* (tastes are not subject to debate).

But when you read a translation, you will necessarily cavil that certain phrases or incidents were not properly rendered. An example here is Chapter LXII, "*El Padre Dámaso se explica.*" It is Chapter 63 in the new translation, which is based on the facsimile printed by the National Rizal Centennial Commission and includes the chapter on Elias and Salome omitted in the Berlin edition (Berliner Buchdruckerei-Actien-Gesellschaft).

The chapter opens with these lines:

In vain are piled on a table the expensive wedding gifts. Neither the diamonds, in their blue velvet cases, nor the *piña* embroideries, nor