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Nicanor G. Tiongson
Salvador F. Bernal: Designing the Stage

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Salvador F. Bernal: Designing the Stage

Manila: National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 2007. 285 pp.

Philippine theater research has not been short of able scholars. Most of them have focused on the history of local dramatic forms or on individual playwrights and their works. Few, however, have ventured into material aspects of Philippine theater. In this context, *Salvador F. Bernal: Designing the Stage* is a welcome addition to the field. The book is a comprehensive review of Bernal's work as designer for theater, with over two hundred full-color photographs of his sketches, models, and actual costumes and sets complementing the text.

Nicanor G. Tiongson is arguably the best authority on Philippine theater history, having written the pioneering studies on the *sinakulo* and the *komedya*, as well as various articles on other forms of Philippine drama. Tiongson is also a playwright, and as such he is privy to the ins and outs of theatrical production in the country.

Salvador F. Bernal, named National Artist for theater design by the Philippine government in 2003, is a worthy subject for Tiongson. Since the 1970s, Bernal has designed the sets and costumes of over 250 productions, which together span the full spectrum of theater arts—ballets, concerts, dramas, operas, and musicals—for which he is rightfully recognized. A combination of a subject like Bernal and a scholar like Tiongson must needs result in a good book.

In the first chapter, Tiongson provides a biographical sketch of Bernal, focusing on his education as an artist. Bernal's apprenticeship began in his mother's dress shop, where he learned techniques of "cutting, sewing, and embroidery" (4). Later, when he was studying at the Ateneo de Manila, Bernal developed an interest in writing poetry. Rolando Tinio, his mentor, also introduced him to theater. Afterward, Bernal received formal training in the theater arts at Northwestern University.

The design process is the subject of the second chapter. As a designer, Bernal shied away from literalist renderings and preferred abstractions or stylization. Tiongson credits this orientation both to his teachers and to his appreciation for modern poetry. In example after example, Tiongson shows the expressiveness of Bernal's designs. The sets and costumes are visual incarnations of the theatrical text, not mere decorations or concessions to

realism. They become symbols or indices of character and feeling. One example that Tiongson cites is the set that Bernal designed for the play *Ilustrado*. The director of the play conceived of it as a memory play, and Bernal's design concept was on the mark:

Bernal designed an empty black space that looked like a distorted cube with a rake to represent consciousness. This space was bound on left, right, and top by big square grills. To show memories materializing in the character's consciousness, objects were flown in and hung suspended from the ceiling or they invaded the stage from left and right. In the end, a huge piece of white cloth was pulled up and to the sides, covering the entire space to signify the total erasure of memory. (48)

Thus, Bernal elevates the status of the designer, who becomes as much a creative artist as are the performers or the director.

In the next two chapters, Tiongson gives a further account of Bernal's creative process and of his ingenuity in the face of limitations. Tiongson writes that Bernal turns to various sources for his design concepts, sometimes combining them to "stunning results" (105), as was the case of his Southeast Asia inspired version of *Twelfth Night* (staged in Tagalog as *Kung Ano'ng Ibigin*).

To turn his design concepts into reality, however, Bernal has had to overcome such realities as limited budgets, poor technology, or forbidding acting or dancing spaces. Bernal finds solutions in the unlikeliest places. Tiongson recounts that for a production of *Julius Caesar*,

Caesar's gigantic head "sculpture" . . . had to crumble at the exact moment of Caesar's assassination in the hands of Brutus and his conspirators. Bernal achieved the effect by following the principle of a local toy, where the parts of a man's body were held upright by strings attached to a wooden panel underneath the platform on which the figurine seemed to stand. When the wooden panel was pressed from below, the strings became loose and the parts of the man's body would collapse On the other hand, when the wooden panel was released, the body parts "miraculously" and instantly came together and the man "stood once more." (138)

Further evidence of Bernal's creativity is his ability to transform inexpensive materials into impressive stage effects. The "crystal chandelier" in a production of *La Traviata*, Tiongson reveals, was merely an assemblage of plastic cases of ballpoint pens; the dreamy "enchanted forest" of Ballet Philippines's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was cheap "gauze *katsa* [unbleached muslin], sprayed with blue, green, and honey-yellow dyes" (144); and the native costumes of many a production were made of *sinamay* or abaca cloth, which under the right lights appear like the genuine article. In these and other instances, Bernal showed his ability to make virtue of necessity, as well as exploiting what technology could do.

The last chapter is an assessment of Bernal's achievements as designer. Tiongson's is unequivocal in his praise. Bernal is an artist with an amazing visual sense, a keen interpretative mind, and an uncompromising work ethic. Limitations are for him opportunities to stretch one's creativity. Ultimately, concludes Tiongson, Bernal proves that "the Filipino artist, who has vision and integrity, can overcome any limitation, to create works that express the native soul, with a consummate artistry that can compete with the very best anywhere in the world" (249).

Some readers may want a more critical, less adulatory reading of Bernal; but they would be captious critics indeed who would find fault with his works. Until such critics appear, however, readers have this book, itself a handsome production befitting its subject, with everything that one can expect of Tiongson: meticulous scholarship, logical organization, and illuminating exposition by examples. *Salvador F. Bernal: Designing the Stage* is for anyone who wants insights into the imagination of a remarkable artist or who seeks inspiration in designing for Philippine theater.

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