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Zarzuela to Sarswela: Indigenization and Transformation

Doreen G. Fernandez



Even before it acquired the name, the Spanish *zarzuela* was a fact of Spanish theater. Defined as a "type of Spanish musical theater, both spoken and sung" (Alier et al 1982, 12), it is usually dated in the early seventeenth century, when *La selva sin amor* by Lope de Vega, with music by an unknown composer, was first presented in 1629 (Peña y Goñi 1967, 25). Although now called "the first Spanish opera" (Peña y Goñi 1967, 28), it was then called an *egloga pastoral*, the term zarzuela only coming into use later in the reign of Philip IV (1621–65), whose Palacio de la Zarzuela, a summer and hunting resort, came to be the scene of theatrical entertainments presented during royal feastdays and birthdays. Some of these came to be called zarzuelas, giving name to the form that later evolved into popular, then national musical theater.

The first company of Italian opera visited Madrid in 1703, and the form seemed to the composers, writers and patrons so much more exalted and serious than their popular musical, that in the eighteenth century, musical Spain came "beneath the absolute and exclusive reign of the Italian opera." So thoroughly did it gain the protection and patronage of the court and the elite that the zarzuela seemed in grave danger of disappearing (Peña y Goñi 1967, 34). A critic, writing "Against Zarzuelas," accused it of not having "engendered the Spanish opera, but only Madrid buffoonery," even after twenty years of public favor (Peña y Goñi 1967, 117).

In spite of the competition and the critical onslaught, however, the vigorous, popular art survived. It was the people's choice, a historian points out, citing *Vox populi, vox Dei*:

The soul of the zarzuela is the nation's soul; it is its song, its sorrow, its jubilation, its expansion . . . it lives in the public square, not in the athenaeum, and it exhibits as native qualities clarity, simplicity, taste, proportion . . . let the nation sing, and may you, Spanish musicians and poets, make it sing!²

By the nineteenth century, the "zarzuelas modernos" being written were undeniably popular—"perhaps because the audience identified with their stories better than with Italian opera, perhaps because of the simpler music, perhaps simply because of nationalism," and perhaps from a combination of all these (Alier 1982, 47). One of the zarzuelas written and premiered at this time was *Jugar con fuego*, considered the *obra maestra* of composer Francisco Asenjo Barbieri, with lyrics by Ventura de la Vega, first presented at the Teatro del Circo in Madrid on 6 October 1851 (Alier 1982, 114)—the first zarzuela the Philippines was to experience.

The Spanish Zarzuela in the Philippines

Spanish theater came to the Philippines first through the *loas*, *oraciones Españolas* and *declamaciones graves*—declamations in verse and in prose—accompanying church and official festivities; then later through the religious dramatizations and plays connected with churches and schools (especially used by the Jesuits as part of their pedagogy). By the nineteenth century, Spanish *dramas*, *comedias*³ and other shorter plays were presented in the halls of literary-artistic societies, in government buildings like the Cuartel del Fortin, and in the twenty-odd theaters in the city, some little more than cockpits, others made of nipa palm and bamboo. On the stages trod Spanish and Filipino amateur *aficionados*, then actors and troupes from Spain—and eventually dancers, choreographers, musicians, and opera singers, both Spanish and Italian.

Of special benefit to the burgeoning theater scene was the wave of deportations caused by political changes in Spain. Governor General Claveria welcomed them, saying: "Here there are no political opinions; here there are only, from the moment you set foot on this soil, Spaniards, and you will be treated by me and by all as [simply] unfortunate compatriots, as gentlemen and Spaniards" (Buzeta and Bravo 1850, 267).⁴ Among these deportees was Narciso de la Escosura, who soon came to head the troupe performing at the Teatro de Binondo. Carlota Coronel, formerly of the Teatro del Principe in Madrid, became lead actress, and the inaugural presentation, *La conjuración de Venecia*, had "an undescribable success," as did the later "obras de magia," *La pata de cabra* and *La redoma encantada* (Retana 1909, 71).

The enthusiastic reception showed not only an audience eager for works of Spanish theater, but also one prepared for them by previ-

ous exposure to amateur theatricals and by the availability of theater sites and backstage workers. When the Spanish political scene changed once more, de la Escosura and Coronel returned home, but theatrical evenings continued, faithfully recorded and commented upon by contemporary critics.⁵

When the Teatro Español and then the Teatro del Principe Alfonso (then considered the best in the city) burned down in 1878, a new theater, the Teatro de Novedades, was built out of the kiosk for public dances on Calle Arroceros. Here various companies performed, one of them a zarzuela troupe organized in Spain by Dario Cespedes. On an earlier visit, he had given readings of poetry and dramatic scenes, in "a powerful voice which amazed and seduced his audience," and had spoken everywhere possible of the *zarzuela grande*,⁶ "citing the need to implant it in Manila, and the substantial profit a company would earn in bringing over the first group" (Atayde 1982, 246).

This he finally did himself, with "Señora Soler as first soprano, Señora Fo de Aragon as second, Señora Perez as contralto," some ladies for the chorus, the bass Vendrell who also acted as stage director, first tenor Mora, baritone Carbonell, Chaves the tenor and comic, and del Rio, the orchestra conductor. In late 1878 or early 1879, these were joined by other actors recruited from performers already in the country in the company's initial offering: the 1851 Madrid hit *Jugar con fuego*. All performances were well attended, especially those of *El Barberillo de Lavapiés*, also by Barbieri, which won the largest audiences and made the most profit (Atayde 1982, 247).

After a year, however, "the usual feelings of tedium, weariness and theater anemia set in":

The women were no longer attractive, as they had passed from Aprils to Augusts, and needed to be replaced by actresses in their spring-time. The antics of Chaves, once so acclaimed, seemed intolerable abuses. Disagreements between management and administration became critical till the company dissolved and the enterprise failed (contrary to Dario Cespedes' prophecy), in the last days of April or the early days of May 1880 (Atayde 1982, 247).

In Retana's careful tracking of Spanish theater in the Philippines, the next zarzuela mentioned is *Junto al Pasig*, *Zarzuela en un acto y en verso*, written at the request of his Jesuit teachers by Jose Rizal, then an eighteen-year-old student at the Ateneo Municipal de Ma-

nila (Retana 1907, 37-50). It was performed in the evening of 8 December 1880, feast of the Immaculate Conception, traditionally a special feast for the Society of Jesus. It was "... una obra un tanto infantil," comments Retana, saying that it was of religious character, with the novel touch of having the "national devil," *Diuata*, taking part, mocking the Filipinos for having, with the change of religion, lost the felicity of earlier times, times when they were absolutely independent, not knowing yet the Catholics or Spaniards who, on the pretext of giving them a new law, later subjugated them (Retana 1909, 105).

One may conjecture that if a schoolboy had thought of writing a zarzuela, surely other writers, impressed and encouraged by Cespedes' success, were also engaged in writing other zarzuelas, but no documentary evidence exists. The next step recorded in the odyssey of the Spanish zarzuela in the Philippines is the arrival in 1880 of Elisea Raguer, Madrid actress, and her lover, the old actor Alejandro Cubero. They took over the Teatro Filipino, and there trained the young actresses Praxedes (Yeyeng) Fernandez, Patrocinio Tagaroma, Venancia Suzara, and the comic actors Nemesio Ratia and Jose Carvajal—all later to gain fame. Retana thought he saw in all of them traces of Spanish origin, believing that none were "purely Malay" (Retana 1909, 105).

Too old for the stage himself, Cubero acted as director, and taught his troupe so well through the fourteen or sixteen years before his death, that the newspaper *El Renacimiento* called him "the father of Spanish theater in the Philippines." It was Yeyeng Fernandez who profited the most from his training, comments Retana. Starting at the age of sixteen or seventeen, she later played lead roles in the Compañía de Zarzuela Raguer, the Compañía de Navarro Peralta, and eventually her own Compañía de Zarzuela Fernandez. A tour to Iloilo and Negros Occidental that was meant to last for two months lasted for eighteen, during which she was said to have been "feasted more lavishly than Edison had been in Paris during the French Exposition." There she eventually married Ricardo Pastor, professor at the Iloilo Escuela de Artes y Oficios. They lived in Iloilo and in Spain, and eventually Yeyeng returned to tour Iloilo again with the Compañía de Zarzuela Fernandez-Pastor (Fernandez 1978, 37-38).

The plays presented included the popular zarzuelas *grandes* *Boccaccio*, *La mascota*, *El rey que rabió*, *El anillo de hierro*, and *La Pasionaria*; two-act zarzuelas like *Las hijas de Zebedeo* and *La tela de araña*; and such one-act plays of the *genero chico* as *La marcha de Cadiz*, *Chateau*

Margaux, *Niña Pancha*, and *Pascual Bailon*, all popular in the Madrid repertory. The plays became current theater in the Philippines too, the songs played and sung by young ladies at school and in civic programs; the overtures popular choices at band concerts. Retana remembers seeing Yeyeng's picture in a Madrid periodical dressed for her roles in *La gatita blanca*, *La Mascota*, *El perro chico*, *La puñalada*, *Bohemios*, *El husar de la guardia* and *El barquillero*, and marvelling at how properly she portrayed characters totally unknown in the Philippines.

Nemesio Ratia developed as an actor, worked in Spain with the Compañía del Teatro Felipe in 1887-1888, then returned to the Philippines. Jose Carvajal was recognized as the best comic actor born in the country, able to portray "even types it was impossible for him to know." Retana points out that these Filipino actors worked only in Spanish plays, and had nothing to do with the actors and actresses of the Tagalog theater (Retana 1909, 118).

Although by this time quite a number of Spaniards living and/or born in the Philippines were writing dramas, comedias and short plays about Philippine matters and characters, Retana records few zarzuelas, perhaps because the Spanish repertory was so familiar and available. One play was *Una novia de encargo*, in one act, by Ricardo Castro Ronderos, with music by the maestro Gore, presented in the Teatro Filipino on 1 March 1881. It was about a couple living in Madrid, and the cast included Raguer, Suzara, Ratia and Carvajal. Ronderos is said to have written two other one-act zarzuelas, *La media naranja* and *Muerte de Lucrecia*, of which Retana has no documentation.

In August 1886 there is news of a zarzuela achieving unusual notoriety. Governor Justo Martin Lunas, lonely for his family in Spain, was wont to host *tertulias* embellished with theatrical entertainment in a small theater he had built in the Casa Gobierno (Retana 1909, 146, 249).

On that day the play was the "zarzuelita cómico-bufa y bailable" *Pascual Bailon*, in which the comic Valentin Fernandez, and the well-known Yeyeng Fernandez "unleashed a cancan *without reservations*, so thoroughly without reservations that not a few grave gentlemen closed their eyes . . . Sr. Martin Lunas should have warned us (they thought) that he was going to offer this indecency, and we would have left the pullets [chicks] at home" (Retana 1909, 150). Señor Lunas never again hosted another entertainment.

Retana comments that censorship had become quite liberal, and Manila theatricals were as "green" as any in Madrid, with comics talking to the audience directly and the latter talking right back. The Archbishop of Manila, P. Payo, however, who had been invited but had not attended, unleashed in his turn a pastoral letter against "indecorous public spectacles":

These plays are not, as they should be, centers of pleasant and licit diversion; they are no school of morality, nor even academic practices of good literary taste; they are a school for the corruption of customs . . . their arguments are hardly decent; the form in which they are exhibited, unrestrained; the dances, songs and other elements of the presentation immoral, if not lewd and scandalous . . . a spectacle more proper to a brothel than to a halfway civilized city! . . .

The theater that does not adjust to that which is Moral is Hell's work. . . . Provocative dances are hell's work; and so is, above all, a dance . . . that not even ruffians would claim, and which for some time has been the scandal in this city of Manila. (Dated 15 August 1886.)

Note, Retana says, the ellipses, for the good Archbishop did not dare write down the word *cancan*. As a result, *Pascual Bailon* ran for many more much-applauded nights. And a year later, writing about a new zarzuela called *El hijo de su papa*, he records that Tagaroma danced marvels (cancan, tango) in another theater, and earned *oles!* by the thousands. "She had such lovely legs!" he sighs (Retana 1909, 151-53).

On 17 August 1893 was inaugurated the Teatro Zorrilla (400 *butacas* or preferred seats, 48 boxes *plateas* and *principales*, 900 *entrada general*), the largest ever in Manila, which eventually became the home of the zarzuela. Its inaugural presentation on 25 October 1893 was the one-act zarzuela in prose and verse, *El diablo mundo*, by the *peninsulares* (Spain-born) Emilio and Rafael del Val, with music by Jose Estella, Filipino. The story was set in Madrid, on *Martes de Carnaval* (Mardigras), and it was still a Spanish, not a Filipino zarzuela, although written and premiered in Manila. Retana thus ends his history of Philippine theater without having documented a zarzuela with Filipino subject matter.

The Spanish zarzuela had thus come to the Philippines with Spanish actors in Spanish plays; had moved to having Filipino and Spanish actors in plays written in Spain, then to Filipino and Spanish

actors in plays written in the Philippines, but still Spanish in authorship, language and substance.

From Zarzuela to Sarswela: Indigenization and Transformation

It was inevitable, however, that the zarzuela would move into the vernacular and become the *sarswela*. Not only the popularity of the Spanish presentations foretold this, but also the native Filipino propensity for song and dance, individually or in combination, and for verse extemporaneous or written.

These elements were part of native dramatic forms, seen in rituals, ceremonies, games, verbal jousts, and in the staged dramas of the colonial period, such as the *sinakulo* or passion play, and the *komedya* or *moro-moro*. The *sinakulo*, although based on the *pasyon*, the religious epic chanted throughout Lent, included apocryphal characters, and scenes staged with song, dance and special theatrical effects. The *komedya*, based on Spanish and vernacular metrical romances, featured scenes of battle and love, as well as song, dance and "magical" effects. The zarzuela, combining verse and prose, song, dance and dialogue with the new element of contemporary subject matter, very promptly found a place in the native repertoire, and became the Filipino *sarswela*.⁷

Mariano Proceso Pabalan Byron wrote Pampanga's first *sarswela*, *Ing Managpe* (The Patcher), with music by Amado Gutierrez David, a one-act comedy about a domestic quarrel between a jealous wife and her husband. Warned by his critics that the Pampango language "would not lend itself well to musical rendition," Pabalan replied that although Pampanga was "hard and sour" and not sweet and soft like Spanish, other languages like French, Italian, English and German had been set to music as well. He was vindicated when the *sarswela*'s premiere performance at the Teatro Sabina in the town of Bacolor, Pampanga, on 13 September 1900 was a resounding success. This is the first documented presentation of a vernacular *sarswela* (Zapanta-Manlapaz 1981, 18).

A seemingly earlier work, *Budhing Nagpahamak*, ca. 1890, is recorded as having been written by a Bulacan playwright, with music by Isidoro Rodriguez, but no staging data are available (Tiongson 1985, 63). The first *sarswela* in Waray (Leyte-Samar Visayan) was *An Pagtabang ni San Miguel* (The Help of St. Michael), by the writer-composer Norberto Romualdez. It was staged at a town fiesta in

1899, but neither the script nor any production data survive (Filipinas 1991, 37).

In 1897 Catalino Palisoc of Pangasinan wrote *Say Limang ag Naketket, Pampinsiwan* (The Hand that Cannot Be Bitten Must Be Kissed), referring to the hand of the Spanish friar, but it had to wait to be staged till 1901, when the American insular government had been established, and he was *Presidente Municipal* of Lingayen. It was said to be so popular that many towns asked that it be staged for them (Casambre 1987, 141).

Valente Cristobal, most prolific and most respected of Iloilo *sarswelistas*, wrote in Hiligaynon, with stage directions in Spanish. His first one-act sarswelas, *Ang Capitan* and *Ang Mga Viciohan* (The Vice-ridden) were both presented in 1903, on 3 March and 30 May respectively. One was about a girl courted by both a Chinese and a captain in the revolution; the other about two servants addicted to drinking and gambling (Fernandez 1978, 52-53).

The earliest date on extant Ilocano sarswela scripts is 1908, the year of Mena Pecson Crisologo's *Codigo Municipal* and *Meysa a Kandidato*, but it is conjectured that there were earlier plays, whose scripts do not survive (Tupas 1987, 141). *Codigo Municipal* has a town's municipal council debating whether to present a sarswela or a komedya at the town fiesta. *Meysa a Kandidato* is about candidates for municipal president (mayor) in an Ilocos town (Hufana 1963, 42-51).

In Cebu, Vicente Sotto, who wrote the first full-length play in the Cebuano language (Sugbuanon), *Gugma sa Yutang Natawhan* (Love for the Motherland) in 1901, wrote his first sarswela, *Maputi ug Maitum* (White and Black) in three acts ca. 1902 (Ramas 1982, 2-3).

The Bicol region, which Spanish zarzuela troupes (Cubero, Carvajal) had visited from Manila, by 1894 had a local troupe, *Compañía Zarzuela de la Torre*, in Legaspi, presenting a Spanish repertoire (*Duo de la Africana*, *El capitan de lanceros*, etc.). In 1910 the *Compañía Zarzuela de Camalig* presented *El anillo de hierro* and others. Justino Nuyda wrote for and directed the *Compañía Zarzuela Bicolana*, which was organized in 1912. His anticlerical zarzuela *Anti Cristo*, 1910, survives, but it is not known if it was staged at all, or if there were earlier scripts or productions.

A scholar speculates that the late blooming of the Bicol sarswela, or perhaps the loss of playscripts, was due to censorship resulting from Archbishop Pelayo's pastoral letter of 1886. An undated

sarswela, *An Maimbud na Aquí* (The Gentle Child) by Nicolasa Ponte-Perfecto suggests what the lost or late plays may have been about, since it is about Miang, a gambler, and Ote, a drinker-gambler, who try to pay off their debts by having their daughter Cande marry Kiama, a Chinese storekeeper (Realubit 1976, 31-34).⁸

Severino Reyes, later to form the Gran Compañía de Zarzuela Tagala, presented his first one-act piece, *Ang Kalupi* (The Wallet) in April 1902 (when it was double-billed with his anti-komedy play, *R.I.P.*), and his very popular three-act *Walang Sugat* (Without Wounds), one of the major works in the Tagalog repertory, on 14 June 1902 (Fernandez 1980, 405).

It is evident that writers in the major Philippine languages—Tagalog, Pampango, Hiligaynon, Bicolano, Iloco, Waray and Pangasinan—had their attention and interest drawn to the zarzuela at about the same time: in the first decade of the twentieth century. The first step in the indigenization of the zarzuela, therefore, was the language. The subject matter followed naturally, being the experience the language could encapsulate, the reality coming from its own cultural matrix.

Thus, although their models for the form, the Spanish zarzuelas, dealt with mythology, royalty, nobility, Dons and Doñas and other characters of Spanish life, the native sarswelistas focused on Filipino situations, domestic and social: marriage, family, vices, elections, feasts. Staged drama in the Philippines, which had before then been mainly religious or drawn from European metrical romances, had finally found the form in which it was possible to present native day-to-day life on stage.

The first wave of Philippine sarswelas consisted mostly of one-act plays, vignettes of Philippine life modeled on the Spanish *genero chico*, but full-length plays of two, three, four and five acts eventually burgeoned in almost every region. They were written in the local language, generally by a member of the community, for specific drama groups, and even for specific performers. Being so directly focused on a concrete and real audience and its interests, they came to be comedies of manners, and eventually social documentation and history.

The Content. In this way the sarswelas differed greatly from their predecessors, the komedyas which had engaged rural and city audiences in pre-sarswela times. While the latter were about kings and queens, princes and princesses, sultans and ambassadors warring and

wooing in imagined European kingdoms, the sarswelas had stories based on Philippine realia, exploring a dimension of verisimilitude that no play on any Philippine stage had done till then. This caused head-on clashes between adherents of the komedya and fans of the new sarswela, who saw it as a proper vehicle for "lessons about life."

In Manila, for example, Severino Reyes staged a comedy called *R.I.P.* (1902), which called the komedya dead and ready for burial. Enraged *komedyantes* in full costume rode around and stoned his house. In Mena Pecson Crisologo's *Codigo Municipal*, the debate about what to present at the town fiesta is won by the sarswela. In Iloilo, a lengthy debate in the newspapers by writers shielded by pseudonyms argued for the verisimilitude of the sarswela and against the costumes, fantasy and plots of the komedya — "spectacles that give the lie to our culture and brutalize the public," theater equivalent to "blinding further those already blind" (Fernandez 1978, 24).

The sarswela soon won the Manila theater stages, but did not necessarily eliminate the komedya, which continued for many years to flourish in provincial fiestas. The new entertainment, modern media, and other factors that eventually caused the sarswela to decline, dealt the same blow to the komedya.

The sarswelas that provided fiesta entertainment in the provinces and filled Manila theater stages drew their plots from contemporary Filipino life. Severino Reyes' *Walang Sugat*, a great success which later was made into a film, is set in the revolution against Spain. Julia is separated from Tenyong, who is away fighting the Spaniards. Because she has to obey her mother, she is set to marry Miguel, the parish priest's nephew. On the day of her wedding Tenyong appears, bandaged and apparently dying, asking that he be married to Julia before he dies. Everyone (except Miguel) agrees to give way to a dying man's wish, and after the wedding, Tenyong rises, *walang sugat*, unwounded, in a ruse in the cause of love. In and around the love story are scenes of torture by Spanish friars, of the day's mode of courtship and familial relations, of daily life and gentle comedy.

Mena Pecson Crisologo's *Natakneng a Panagsalisal, or Noble Rivalidad* (Noble Rivalry, ca. 1911) has Emilia meeting Antonio, a captain, during the Filipino-American war. Carlos, her loved one, had joined General Aguinaldo's army and was missing in action; his betrothed had died in the American shelling. They fall in love; Carlos and Antonio meet on the battlefield and decide, in "noble rivalry," to both go back to the field, with the survivor winning the right to marry the girl they both love.

The major Pampango playwright, Juan Crisostomo Soto (after whom the verbal joust called Crissotan is named) staged in 1902 his masterpiece, *Alang Dios* (There is No God). It weaves around the story of a forced and loveless marriage a network of emotions and character types: a bitter, abandoned lover accused of theft; a father concerned with privilege rather than his daughter's feelings; a proud and domineering aunt; a docile daughter who cannot forget the man she loves but cannot disobey her elders. It ends in recognition and death. "There is no God!" the two men in Maria's life exclaim; "... there is a God," Don Monico answers, "a God who rewards the good and punishes the bad."

Valente Cristobal's *Nating* (1908), the best-known and best-loved Hiligaynon sarswela, has the central figure kidnapped by Roberto, leader of a band of men farming in the mountains. The situation serves as a test for her three suitors, Aniceto the lawyer, Enrique the rich man, and Jose the farmer. It also creates the occasion for Roberto's men to speak of themselves and the fate, fortune or injustice that had led them to live on the mountain away from their loved ones.

The later plays that gained fame beyond their regions were mostly Tagalog sarswelas that opened in Manila and then were taken by professional troupes to other regions for fiesta celebrations, or else opened at the Teatro Zorrilla and then moved to smaller theaters in Manila and elsewhere, and even to places without theaters, where temporary wooden platforms served as stages for the period's reigning drama form.

Ang Kiri (The Flirt, 1926), by Servando de los Angeles with music by Leon Ignacio, is about a young woman with suitors of wealth and political power, who falls in love with a country boy. When he marries his country sweetheart, she realizes the folly of her ways, and accepts the faithful Jose, poet and longtime suitor. It is documented as having had 351 performances, but Atang de la Rama, who played the leading role, and theater scholars, believes that it totaled more than 700 (Tiongson 1987, cf. 22 and 30).

Aling Atang's first leading role, at age fourteen, was that of Angelita in *Dalagang Bukid* (The Country Girl, 1919) by Hermogenes Ilagan and Leon Ignacio—a young girl who sells flowers in a nightclub, bringing a whiff of fresh country air to the world of politicians, wealthy old men, and dancers-for-hire, and whose love for a young student wins out over the blandishments of an old and wealthy suitor. This best known of all Tagalog sarswelas holds the record:

more than a thousand performances all over the islands, even before Aeta tribes. Its best known song, "Nabasag ang Banga" (The Jar Was Broken), performed with a tap dance and rich in mischievous sexual innuendo, is surely the most popular song in sarswela history.

Precioso Palma's *Paglipas ng Dilim* (After the Darkness, 1920), with music by Leon Ignacio, is about Ricardo, who has just finished medicine, and his shy sweetheart Estrella. They are parted by the Americanized Caridad, who compromises Ricardo by getting him to kiss her in the garden. The lovers are reunited at the end, Caridad is revealed to be pregnant by the congressman Don Juanito, and "the dark clouds . . . pass away."

Around, within and behind the love stories central to almost all the sarswelas are the Filipino mores and manners of the first decade of the century, the country's first "American years." The early plays explored the feelings against Spain, especially against the friars who were the face of Spain most visible to ordinary folk. Others looked back toward the war against the Americans. Most explored the years of Americanization, and the minutiae of Philippine life: the value of education and even the fear of it (in Angel Magahum's Hiligaynon work, *Panimalay ni Kabesa Ytok*, 1907, an old mother objects to her children's education because she fears it will cause them to look down on their parents and on traditional ways); the persistence of old ways (herb-healing, arranged marriages); vices (*pan-guingge* for women, cock-fighting and drinking for men); the obedience or disobedience of children; the new ways (dancing the fox trot, speaking English, flirting) the young were learning; the value of hard work; the hardships of the poor.

The theater form, with its songs and dances, and the intentness of the folk writers on showing real life and teaching profitable lessons, made the sarswela light but didactic. It never became real social satire, although some plays touched on, exposed, caricatured, and even explored such social ills as the corruption and false promises of politicians; the "new morality"; the unfeeling, often cruel treatment by landlords and bosses of tenants, employees and servants. It was the world the writers lived in; its problems were theirs. Few in the theater world were fulltime writers; most wrote not in ivory towers, but in the midst of the human whirl, earning their bread, participating in community life, journalism, business, and politics. Julian Cruz Balmaceda's *Sa Bunganga ng Pating* (In the Jaws of the Shark, 1921) dealt with the usurious loans extended by landlords to

their tenants, a problem unfortunately not usually solved in real life by the landlord's repentance, as it is in the sarswela.

In the plays' heroes and heroines were revealed deeply-held community values. Heroines were always *mahinhin* (feminine, modest, retiring), obedient, religious, loyal. Heroes were strong, brave, loving and loyal. Very often they were poets, who were seen not as Bohemian and wild, but eloquent and wise, sages of the community. Later they were professionals (a doctor just graduated, like Ricardo in *Paglipas ng Dilim*; a lawyer-to-be, like Crispin in *Dalagang Bukid*), future pillars of the community. The *contravidas*⁹ were those who went against traditional mores—by being bold, unfeminine or loose in morals (as was Caridad in *Ang Kiri*), colonial-minded, unkind and condescending (as was Carriton in Patricio Mariano's *Anak ng Dagat* [Child of the Sea, 1921]), and especially treacherous or disloyal.

The servants and comics demonstrated the more ordinary run of humanity. They were hungry, scheming, ambitious, sometimes in complete control of their masters and households. They commented on and poked fun at the foibles of the rich. They announced meals, carried messages, made farcical errors, and composed a substructure of human fun and error on which the heroes and heroines built and wielded their noble emotions.

Most of the sarswelas had happy endings—perhaps because it was conventional to end with a big chorus singing, more cogently because in their plays, *sinakulo* or *komedya* or sarswela, Filipino folk writers have wanted plots resolved, knots untied (or tied, as in marriage), order restored, dreams fulfilled, and hope extended. Even more than it mirrored their actual lives, the sarswela reflected their aspirations. Since happy endings are less than common in real life, this made for an incomplete realism, but a real one nonetheless, reflective of a period's mores and perceptions.

The context. Around all these plays grew a world of theater, and a theater of conventions. In the small towns and cities, sarswelas were usually staged at town fiestas, when they were paid for by the *Comite de Festejos*, the organizing group, and no admission fees were charged. Outside fiestas, they were usually organized by groups (*samahang sarswelista*), or by individuals, like the playwright, who did the casting, directing, financing and organizing—and thus was the primary beneficiary of any profits.

In Manila, such groups as Severino Reyes' Gran Compañía de Zarzuela Tagala, Hermogenes Ilagan's Compañía Ilagan, and smaller

troupes like the Samahang Paguia of Tondo and the Samahang Gabriel of Sta. Cruz staged the plays that filled Manila theaters, and then moved on to the provinces when requested (usually for town fiestas).

Low though the fees were then, they represented professional status, and Atang de la Rama, who received the highest fees (ten pesos a performance, twice the amount paid to the leading male actor), later bought land and built a house with her savings. "It was rare for anybody to be paid 10 pesos," she recalls. "With ten pesos then, one could buy two sets of clothes, or pay the rent for one month, or buy a month's supply of food" (de la Rama quoted in Tiongson 1987, 24).

Considered by many a higher reward than the money was the prestige and respect given the artists. They were adulated, and housed in the best homes in the towns they visited. Atang de la Rama recalls being transported in carriages, trains, boats, even carabao sleds—all bedecked with flowers to honor the undisputed Queen of the Zarzuela. As a young girl rehearsing in Lucena in 1912, she was taken to sing for a lady by a gentleman who turned out to be Manuel Quezon, later president of the Commonwealth. Maria Carpena, who with Estanislawa San Miguel, Amanding Montes, Horacio Morelos, Marceliano Ilagan, and of course Atang de la Rama, constituted the sarswela constellation, had a street in Quiapo named after her.

Music for the sarswelas was not usually composed by the writer, except in the case of playwrights like Angel Magahum of Iloilo, who was both musician and journalist. The composers of sarswela music were, in the small towns, untrained or barely-trained church or folk musicians, and in Manila, such accomplished song writers as Leon Ignacio, and also schooled musicians and composers like Bonifacio Abdon, Nicanor Abelardo and Francisco Buencamino. Very often the composers also acted as musical arrangers and conductors of the orchestras. The latter ranged from a single piano, guitar or harmonica, to small or larger groupings of piano, violin, viola, clarinet, flute, trombone, cornet, double bass, drum and cymbals, depending on the group's finances or the town's resources.

"A zarzuela has 20 songs divided into *preludio*, *concertante*, *solo*, *dueto*, *terceto*, and *coro*. A simple tune is played while the curtain is lowered between acts," says Atang de la Rama (1987, 9). A study of the Iloilo sarswela shows that the minimum number of songs for a one-act piece was four, and that the number of songs in a three-

act play ranged from fifteen to eighteen (Fernandez 1978, 112-13). There were solos, duets, trios, quartets, sextets, septets, and full choruses—determined not only by the action, but by the availability of singers. The songs functioned as dialogue, and as asides, comment, or soliloquies. This is where the *sarswela* differs from what later was called the *drama musical*, in which pre-made songs were inserted into a prose play. In the *sarswela*, the songs were written as part of the text.

The backstage crew was informally constituted by the playwright, his family, friends and fellow enthusiasts. An important member was the *apuntador* or prompter (sometimes the playwright), who was in charge of signalling all cues. Usually, he no longer had to dictate every line and its delivery, as was done in the *komedya*. Instead he signaled cues to orchestra and actors (in the small theaters, by knocking on the floor in front of the *concha* or prompter's box). Occasionally he might leave the box between acts to give further instructions backstage, alert actors and scene-changers, direct assistants. The work of stage manager had not crystallized in one person at the time.

The scenery consisted principally of painted backdrops, or *telones*, that rolled up and down or moved to one side by means of pulleys. These included a front curtain or *telon de boca*, and for the larger, city-based productions, perhaps a show curtain; a *telon de fondo* or back curtain which, for the provincial stages, was all that divided acting and dressing areas; and then all the other backdrops needed for a particular play: *telon calle* (street scene), *sala rica* and *sala pobre* (rich or poor living rooms), country views, courtrooms, cemeteries, prisons, and the like. The wings were concealed by tormentors of painted canvas (*bastidores*); teasers (*bambalinas*) decorated the headings and hid the theater ceiling and mechanisms. Scene painters—in Iloilo, the man who painted backdrops for photography studios was one—were responsible for these. The simple props used—tables, chairs, desks—were generally, especially in the small towns, borrowed from the theater, the director, or friends. The *tramoyista* had charge of securing and managing the *telones* and set props, aided by rope-pullers, lightsmen, mikesmen, and various other volunteers.

Costumes, being contemporary Filipino dress, very often came from the participants' own wardrobes, and were meant principally to introduce the character type. A young boy wore a sailor suit; a young girl a middy dress. A rich lady wore a *terno* with butterfly sleeves, long skirt and *tapis* (overskirt), and carried a fan and a

handbag. A lady of lower station wore the loose blouse called *ki-mona* and a long skirt (*saya*), and had an *alampay* slung over her shoulder or covering her head. A rich man wore a suit, *American abierta* or *cerrada* (with lapels or without), carried a cane and wore a hat. A poor man wore *camisa chino* (collarless shirt), loose trousers, slippers, and a kerchief round his neck or bound around his temples (especially if he was going to a cockfight). Costumes and handprops made no statement about design or character, but were simply part of the exposition.

Conventions of behavior further underlined the values revealed in the sarswela plots. Women were not touched or held by men beyond the elbows; certainly there was no kissing and embracing. Much unspoken communication was done with the handkerchief and the fan, the eyes and the manner, the walk and the way of speaking. Heroes and heroines spoke in lyrical verse, *contravidas* and comedians in prose. It was obvious, even only from stage conventions, that this was a world of innocence, a world of Filipinos awakening from the years of Spain to a new, "modern" world which they were trying to understand and manage, armed with their traditional values. The theater of conventions was a structure of manners and mores, a mirror held up to a particular time and world.

Eventually the sarswela world became a whole supportive network of writers, composers, actors and actresses, musicians, stage designers and painters, costume makers (in Pandacan, it was said, one could rent in one day all that was necessary for a sarswela or an opera), rental firms, orchestras—the structure necessary for professional theater.

In the towns and villages, the sarswela world was a community that, for special occasions, cooperatively focused on theater. They agreed on its importance, contributing to it artistry, craft, money, or interest, and were bonded by it as they were by town relationships or the agricultural cycle. The fact of staging a sarswela was not more important than the process by which it was staged. As it was in village rituals and ceremonies, all were both performers and audience, actually and potentially. It was not only community theater, but also theater as community.

Decline and Change. The professional theater did not quite materialize, however, because the sarswela declined in the thirties. The first and most obvious reason was the competition from the new entertainment: vaudeville and the movies.

Vaudeville (*vodavil*, *bodabil*) had come in with the American regime, at first as entertainment for the soldiers. Very soon, however, the chorus girls, minstrel songs, jazz numbers, skits, magic and other variety acts, drew audiences with their novelty, and their convenience as intermission numbers between acts of long sarswelas, or between one-act sarswelas in a set. Eventually they triumphed over the play one had to rehearse for long periods, the play of traditional plots, not only because they were easy to string together and stage, but because they painlessly purveyed the new American culture in songs and comedy, dance and spectacle. Even, in fact, as the sarswela was just beginning, the Teatro Zorrilla had already opened its gates in 1901 to "Novelty in Manila," advertised as:

Good American orchestra, New Acts, New Songs, Good Jokes, Acrobats, Dancers, Contortionists, The Most Brilliant and Stupendous Minstrel First Part Extant, Beautiful Lights and Scenic Effects, Gorgeous Costuming, Ragtime Talks, Ragtime Songs, Ragtime Walks, Every Feature Bright and Up to Date—PLUS—A Grand Walk of All Nations! (Lapeña-Bonifacio 1972, 23)

Eventually, the vaudeville/stage show world of Filipino versions of Fred Astaire (Bayani Casimiro), Charlie Chaplin (Canuplin), Sophie Tucker (Katy de la Cruz), and later Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, etc., was fully as responsible for the Americanization of the Filipino as were the English language and the educational system.

Philippine movies won the sarswela audience away by providing the same fare that the play had, but on the silver screen. The first full-length Filipino feature film was *Dalagang Bukid* (1919), also starring Atang de la Rama. Because it was a silent film, she sang the songs behind the screen, thus bridging the sarswela and film worlds both in her own person and in her stage/screen image. It was a symbolic and actual beginning:

From then on the actors, directors and writers of the stage systematically migrated, so to speak, into the new medium of film, and brought with them not only the different genres of the theater . . . and their corresponding world view, values, characters and plots, but the acting and directorial conventions of these theater forms as well.

From 1919 to the 1970s, several generations of screen sweethearts starred in what are really filmed sarsuwelas. In the 30s and 40s, Carmen Rosales and Rogelio de la Rosa rose to stardom with movies like *Señorita* and *Maalaala Mo Kaya?* (Will You Remember?), while Rosa

del Rosario and Leopoldo Salcedo came back to popularity after the war with movies like *Bakya Mo Neneng* (Your Wooden Clogs, Neneng). In the 50s, Nida Blanca and Nestor de Villa starred in filmed sarsuwelas which showed the influence of American Broadway musicals, like *Batangueña* (Batangas Girl) and *Waray-Waray* (Nothing [at All]). In the 60s and 70s, the singing star Nora Aunor . . . [appeared] in musicals like *Lollipops & Roses*, and *The Gift of Love*. (Tiongson 1985, 8)

A second and less obvious reason for the decline of the sarswela was the teaching of English in the educational system established by the American Insular Government in 1901. This meant that the language of the educated elite soon became English. In 1915 the first Filipino play in English, *A Modern Filipina*, by Jesusa Araullo and Lino Castillejo, was staged at the Philippine Normal College. The first plays in English were school plays, awkward of language and minimal in dramatic import, often written for school or civic occasions. Their authors, however, were the educated—among them at least three future presidents of the University of the Philippines. Thus the coming artists, the future intellectuals, the writers who could have propelled the sarswela towards contemporary ideas and issues, were writing in English, and not in the vernaculars, not in the language of the sarswela. They were also getting theater experience by staging Western plays, rather than komedya or sarswela.

And just as the early sarswelistas had called the komedyas fit only for the barrios and the ignorant, the new playwrights thought only Shakespeare, Greek tragedy, and American/British plays were fit for the educated. Most were no longer even aware of vernacular folk drama, of the repertory of their past.

Within the sarswela lay another reason for its demise. Its plots came to constitute a formula: exposition, problem, resolution (often hasty and artificial). There was circumlocution rather than complexity; predictability rather than insight. Folk writers, banking on the success of formulae, copied or adapted each other's plots, and did not venture further into the true life of their subject matter, or into analysis of problems and their possible solutions. They thus did not create a form that would change with the times and open new horizons for the play. They kept within traditional parameters—not only because of their record of success, but also because the short period of the flowering of the sarswela (barely thirty years) had not really given it time to stretch its muscles, spread its wings, and explore the new world.

One can conjecture that, had its growth not been truncated by historical events (the English language and an American education; vaudeville and the movies; the new accompanying culture), the sarswela could have grown in realism and daring, developing as other folk drama forms have. Unfortunately it did not.

Revival and Revitalization: The New Sarswela

Many years later, in the fifties, a curiosity about the past caused the revival of some sarswelas, mostly by schools. The audience, nurtured on Western drama, theater and film, found *Dalagang Bukid* and Florentino Ballecer's *Sundalong Mantika* (1924) naive and slow. The first successful revival was that of *Walang Sugat* in 1970, the pre-Martial Law time of student activism and growing nationalist consciousness. The original script was used; the music was reconstructed from the memories of those who remembered the old songs; additional music included "Bayan Ko," which later became the anthem of anti-Marcos protest. The anti-Spanish scenes in the play suggested anti-Marcos feelings; the very fact of its having come from the repertory of the past inflamed audience enthusiasm. The production had more than fifty performances in Manila and elsewhere, funded and organized by the Zarzuela Foundation of the Philippines, which also launched a playwriting contest for modern sarswelas.

Revival moved into revitalization in the seventies, with such plays as Isagani Cruz's *Halimaw* (The Monster, 1971; music by Lutgardo Labad), a modern sarswela about a despot obviously modelled on Ferdinand Marcos; and Amelia Lapeña Bonifacio's *Ang Bundok* (The Mountain, 1977; music by Fabian Obispo), which had the requisite love story, but among a mountain people banding together against foreign intruders coveting tribal lands and mines. In *Sumpang Mahal* (Sacred Vow, 1976) by Domingo Landicho (music by Rey Paguio), the colonial mentality of Filipino returnees from the US was not only satirized, but shown to legislate against love lasting and happy endings. *Ms. Philippines* (1980) by Isagani Cruz (music by Rey Paguio) explored the aspirations and frustrations of beauty contest participants, while Bienvenido Lumbea's *Ang Palabas Bukas* (Tomorrow's Show, 1978; music by Lucio San Pedro) had a singer from the provinces bursting into the city bigtime and all its pain and disillusionment.

The most successful contemporary sarswela has been Nicanor Tiongson's *Pilipinas circa 1907* (1982; music by Lutgardo Labad, Louie Pascasio, and Lucien Letaba). Loosely based on and inspired by Severino Reyes' *Filipinas para los Filipinos* (1905), which held that Filipinas should marry Filipinos, Tiongson's play argued that the motherland as well, should be for Filipinos. He showed, through incidents based on historical fact, how "the Americans systematically and simultaneously conquered the economy, politics, culture and education of the country during the first decade of the century" (Tiongson 1985, 9).

Pilipinas circa 1907 won its young audience who had not known the sarswela, as well as its older viewers who had, by means of the same attractions packaged in the sarswela of old: a stageful of girls dancing and singing; two pairs of lovers in love and in pain; comic servants, songs and situations; familial and familiar relationships. This time, however, they had the bitter-sweetness of truth, the bitterness of reality. The family's tobacco factory is coveted by an American who plots with an uncle eager to profit from the new power relations. A worker is killed in the clash. A naive Filipino is duped by his American wife. The poet-hero is imprisoned and tortured because of his nationalist beliefs. Andres must leave Pura to help the revolutionaries in the hills.

Pilipinas suggests what the old sarswela could have developed into, given time to grow, intellectualization by new and non-traditional writers, and the nationalist daring of awakened artists.

The sarswela is again alive in the Filipino dramatic consciousness, alongside related forms like rock musicals (*Bernardo Carpio*, 1976; *Bayani*, 1984), pop ballets (*Tales of the Manuvu*, 1977; *Rama Hari*, 1978), ethnic musicals (*Encantada*, 1992). It is still far, however, from the popularity of its heyday. In that time past, the zarzuela, a colonial theater form, brought to the country for the entertainment and profit of Spaniards, was slowly absorbed, then indigenized and transformed into a native genre, the sarswela.

This was done, first of all, by shaping it in the native languages, and then fitting it into the community structure, where were already ensconced its predecessors (and contemporaries), religious theater and the komedya. Here theater functioned not only as entertainment or didactic tool, but as communal bond. The staging of the sarswela in a town for a fiesta partook of the professional, but even more of the social. Authors writing for their known audiences, then casting,

rehearsing, and staging within the structure of friendship, family and community, expressed more than self. They spoke community. The process itself was language that spoke of values held together, of a community commitment and concern, of a common moral universe.

A researcher explains that the production of *sarswelas* in Leyte and Samar in the thirties and forties involved a goodly number in the community: the sponsor financing production costs; the playwright choosing actors and actresses and welcoming volunteers for the stage crew; the townspeople contributing money, donating stage props and materials for costumes, building the stage, working backstage, acting; the onlookers at rehearsals; the final audience. Those who refused proffered roles were believed to incur *gaba* (God's wrath). "The process of production of the play, therefore, was as significant as the text, because it depended on and enhanced this communal bond" (Filipinas 1991, 171).

The *sarswela* texts, in turn, explored matters of deep Filipino concern: harmony in family relationships, the retention of traditional values, the adherence to moral codes, fulfillment in love and marriage. In doing so, they documented the manners and morals of the era, and thus the culture and consciousness of the community.

A historian sees, for example, in the plays of Valente Cristobal about Iloilo carpenters, stevedores, farmworkers, servants, landowners, politicians and policemen, mothers and children, not only an awareness of social structure, but also role models "to inspire industry, honesty, and other personal virtues"; explicit attacks on vice; calls for individual morality, better working class conditions, Philippine independence, an awareness of friar duplicity, and nationalism; and "an exposition of peasant and worker grievances against the social system" (McCoy 1982, 171).

He suggests that the Iloilo *sarswela* was "both a catalyst and a reflection of the city's changing mass consciousness during the early decades of this century." Created for a mass patronage, it mirrored, at least in part, the values of its mass audience:

... it was not limited to a passive role of social documentation. . . . the zarzuelistas played a subtle role in the transformation of popular attitudes towards both social morality and the conditions of working class life. . . . the dramatists' presentation of these conditions on the stage was both social documentation and artistic creation, while their didacticism involved an activist attempt at transformation of the real-

ity which had served as their inspiration. Hence the very close correlation between changing popular consciousness and the zarzuela's fortunes . . . the Iloilo zarzuela remains today the most accurate available indicator of the city's changing mass consciousness during these critical decades.

[The writers] . . . were members of a self-conscious "urban intellectual elite" that tried to transform their society and mediate the socio-cultural strains that accompanied the region's rapid economic development . . . [they] represent an intellectual and cultural synthesis of the indigenous and foreign for which the most appropriate term would be neither "Western" nor "Asian" but "Filipino." (McCoy 1982, 201-203)

The sarswela, theater born of Spanish parenthood but grown Filipino, thus explored, documented, and synthesized. Mirroring a culture and its consciousness, it in turn created a culture and a consciousness. Coming as it did right at the junction of history when the Filipino emerged from his Spanish centuries and entered into his American decades, even its inchoate realism reflected the reality of transition.

Of that time and that Filipino, the sarswela was succinct documentation and eloquent expression. In the greatly changed present, experiments with the new sarswela have shown the viability of the form. There have not only been revivals (*Dalagang Bukid*; *Paglipas ng Dilim*), but also new sarswelas like *Ang Palabas Bukas* and *Pilipinas circa 1907*. There have also been rock musicals on folk legends, like *Bernardo Carpio* (1976); combinations of myth, pop song and ballet, like *Tales of the Manuvu* (1977); new musicals that recall the soul of the sarswela and the glitter of Broadway, like *Bayani* (1984); musicals combining myth, ethnic instruments, dance, song and a new sound, like *Encantada* (1992).

All this indicates the ways a folk form can be transformed—and survive. This indicates the new content, music, dramaturgy, manner, pacing and staging styles that influence and transform the sarswela. They bring it into the present, give it new audiences and life, and thus make survival possible for a drama form that started in Spain, was indigenized into a folk form, and became deeply part of Philippine art and life.

Notes

1. Antonio Peña y Gofí, *España desde la opera a la zarzuela* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, S.A., 1967), p. 25. (In the Table of Chronology on page 260, the date given is 1626.)
2. "Discurso leído ante la Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando en la recepción público de don Antonio Peña y Gofí el día 10 de abril de 1892," in Peña y Gofí (1967, 241).
3. The term *comedia* as used by Spanish dramatists indicates a play in three acts and in verse, not necessarily a comedy. The Philippine *comedia/komedyá* or *moro-moro* is a full-length play in verse with very specific subject matter: lives of saints, or more frequently stories of Moors and Christians from European metrical romances. In this article, *comedia* will indicate a Spanish play; *komedyá* the Philippine *moro-moro*.
4. Retana (1909, 71). Retana is the authoritative source for Spanish theater in the Philippines. He gathers all available bibliographical and other data, rectifies errors, and collates data.
5. Juan Atayde's "The Theaters in Manila," for example, is a series of articles on theater activities, published by *La Ilustración Filipina* from 12 August 1892 to 7 September 1893. (Translated by Concepcion Rosales and Doreen G. Fernandez, *Philippine Studies* 30 (1982): 70-91; 231-61.
6. The *zarzuela grande* is the full-length, usually three-act zarzuela. The *genero chico* is a vignette or *tranche de vie* in one act.
7. Although most of the Filipino writers used the word zarzuela in the Spanish orthography to identify their works, Nicanor G. Tiongson, theater historian, has suggested that the Tagalog orthography be used to identify plays written in Philippine languages. In this paper, *zarzuela* will mean the Spanish form or a Spanish play; *sarswela* the Filipino play or a Filipino work.
8. Realubit (1976, 31-34). Although the date 1866 is cited, the cleric and the pastoral letter mentioned are almost surely P. Payo and his letter of 1886.
9. The *contravida*, literally "anti-hero/ine," is the foil to the hero/heroine; often but not necessarily a villain or villainess.

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