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Pamela del Rosario Castrillo



This article briefly reviews Philippine political theater, a theater which emerged in the early 1900s. This early revolutionary drama was called "seditious" by the American colonial power. More recent representations of this form were the street theater of the late 1960s and the early 1970s. The martial law years (1973 to the 1980s) saw the development of a vigorous and radical mix of traditional, transformed and adopted theater forms, most of which were political in one way or another.

Political theater in the Philippines had its roots in the Revolutionary Theater of 1900–1903 which arose when imperial power in the Philippines changed guard in 1898 after a stage-managed Spanish-American War. The Filipinos expressed their liberation aspirations not only in armed struggle but also in cultural action.

The drama (prose play), which was part of the dominant culture during the Spanish colonial period (1521–1898), was refunctioned in the service of the revolution. A song and dance romantic drama with mild social comment and earthly humor, the *drama* hinged on a love story. Into this popular and seemingly innocuous form was poured incendiary and contemporary messages in an elaborate system of symbol and allegory. Advocating nationalism and denigrating collaboration, Aurelio Tolentino's *Kahapon, Ngayon at Bukas* is an allegorical account of the struggle for independence. Inangbayan (the Motherland) and Taga-ilog (the Filipino) lead the resistance movement against the colonizers represented by Haring Bata (Chinese), Dilatna-Bulag, Matanglawin and Halimaw (Spain, the colonial administration and the friars); and Bagong Sibol and Malaynatin (US and its colonial administration). Taga-ilog defeats Haring Bata and Matanglawin in armed combats and prepares to engage in yet another revolt against Malaynatin. Bagong Sibol, however, sees fit to grant the Filipinos their freedom. Juan Abad's *Tanikalang Ginto* depicts freedom and the Filipino as the lovers Liwanag and K'Ulayaw

who remain steadfast despite Maimbot (US). The play warns against Americans bearing gifts. Tomas Remigio's *Malaya* advocates the revolt of the masses.

Defying various oppressive laws such as the Flag Law and Sedition Law, the revolutionary theater fueled the revolutionary ardor of the Filipino people, at times to the point of open defiance of American rule (Lumbera and Lumbera 1982, 106). It served to apprise the Filipino people of the evils of past and present colonial masters and collaborators and keep the revolutionary spirit burning as it unmasked the so-called benevolence of the colonials.

The recent and seminal work by Patajo-Legasto (1988), covers post-Liberation to the end of the Era of Authoritarianism (1946–85) and divides contemporary theater into four periods, thus: 1946–64: the bourgeois theater in English; 1965–68: the theater of social concern; 1969–72: revolutionary theater; and 1973–85: the emancipated theater. These categories will be used in this article.

The Bourgeois Theater in English, 1946–1964

Eventually, however, state power manifested in the relentless arrests and attendant persecutions of playwrights cum directors and the cast as well as audience imposed the culture of silence. This culture of silence was upheld and propagated by the American public school curriculum and the English language; and art, cinema and literature, all of which were widespread. These cultural apparatuses effectively disseminated the American ideology to the detriment of Philippine nationalism. Through state power and consent, postwar Philippines (1946–64) was a virtual neocolony in economic, political and cultural spheres.

Consequently, Philippine theater in these times was bourgeois and predominantly in English, composed variously of western classics in translation, Anglo-American plays and a few original Filipino plays in English. Common themes included love and family, and preoccupations and concerns of the emerging middle class. The common theatrical mode used was psychological realism which probed the inner space of man to the exclusion of social realities.

Wilfredo Nollado's *Turn Red the Sea* (1963) focuses on the motives that drive a young man to expose the immoralities of his father (Patajo-Legasto 1988, 118). Foreign masterpieces performed at this time include Tennessee Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer* (1961),

Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1958); William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1953) and Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1963).

The theater practitioners belonged to the academe and the business community, both of which provided financial support to the productions. The former also provided the theater venue in the form of the school auditorium which almost always had a proscenium stage. This stage effectively separated theater performers from the audience, the composition of which was also bourgeois, i.e., teachers, students, businessmen and bankers, in short, those steeped in the American culture. The plays presented therefore spoke only to the upper and bourgeois classes and "carried the dominant ideology of the power bloc," marginalizing the masses (Patajo-Legasto 1988, 126).

Theater of Social Concern, 1965–1968

From 1965 to 1968, the theater of social concern arose in response to the growing disenchantment with foreign capitalism. Amid the growing outcry against American capitalism and neocolonialism among the members of the academe and the national intelligentsia, the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP) reorganized itself. Militant organizations proliferated: in 1964, the Kabataang Makabayan (KM) was launched; the Communist Party of the Philippines was established in 1967, the Samahan ng mga Demokratikong Kabataan (SDK) and the New People's Army (NPA) in 1969. Formative alliances and worker organizations, e.g., the Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) spread like wildfire around this time.

Nationalists like Claro M. Recto and Renato Constantino protested against the social ills such as the continued economic dependence on the U.S., corruption in government, private army clashes, the social inequalities, the rising cost of living vis-à-vis inflation, the presence of the American bases on Philippine soil, and the unjust Parity Rights agreement (Patajo-Legasto 1988, 157).

The literati, theater practitioners and other artists started to question the role and direction of Philippine culture. To counter cultural dependence, theater content, style and purpose changed. Poverty, injustice, oppression, graft and corruption became common themes during this period. Plays featured the laborer and farmer, slum dweller and scavenger using social realism, i.e., the mode that utilizes theater as a lecture platform for purposes of mass education

(Patajo-Legasto 1988, 184). Theater sought to be more responsive to the plight of the majority of the Filipinos without advocating anarchy.

One of the foremost writers in English was Alberto Florentino who penned *The World is an Apple*, *Cadaver*, *Cavort with Angels* and *Oli Impan*, which focus on the faces of poverty in the slum areas.

Apart from original plays in English, there were translations from English to Filipino aimed at widening the audience of Philippine theater. Instrumental were major theater figures such as Wilfrido Maria Guerrero and Rolando Tinio. Guerrero translated English plays by Filipinos, some of which are: *Wanted: A Chaperon* (*Kailangan: Isang Tsaperon*); *Women are Extraordinary* (*Ang mga Babae ay Kahanga-hanga*) and *Basketball Fight* (*Laban ng Basketbol*). These present bourgeois concerns, e.g., decorum. A nonbeliever of plays written by Filipinos, Tinio popularized western classics instead. Among his translations are Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (*Pahimakas ng Isang Ahente*); Tennessee Williams' *Glass Menagerie* (*Laruang Kristal*); and August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (*Bb. Julie*), exercises in psychological and magic realism. "The translation of classics by Tinio was the harbinger of the shift from English to Pilipino as the language of Philippine theater" (Patajo-Legasto 1988, 190). Tinio attributed the nonpatronage of the people of the preceding bourgeois theater in English to the simple fact that English cannot quite grasp the Filipino soul. He insisted then that theater had to be done in the language of the people. Henceforth, more original Filipino plays were written and more translations were done of western classics and English plays by Filipinos.

An important development was the Ateneo's Dulaang Sibol. Onofre Pagsanghan encouraged young people to write and produce Pilipino plays. Some of its notable turnouts are Tony Perez whose *Biyaheng Timog* and *Gabun* center on interpersonal relationships and Paul Dumol who penned *Ang Paglilitis ni Mang Serapio*, a grim picture of poverty told in song and verse and *Kabesang Tales*, which tells of the search for justice that leads to the countryside.

Although English was still the language of theater, it was on its way out. The advocacy of the use of Filipino by major theater figures further helped establish Pilipino in theater.

One of the most significant events of 1967 was the development of the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA), which aims to

bring . . . about an authentic kind of culture—national, scientific, creative, representative of the toiling majority of the people, and resistant to the domination of a foreign and colonial culture. (Labad, n.d., 22)

Armed with a vision of a truly national theater movement, PETA sought to help bring about an alternative hegemony through its productions and outreach programs. Composed of accomplished theater workers, PETA through Kalinangan Ensemble, its repertory company, has produced translations of English works by the previous generation of writers such as Virginia Moreno's *Straw Patriot (Bayaning Huwad)*, which tells of land-related issues and revolution, and Estrella Alfon's *Tubig*, a study in urban poverty.

Influenced by the theories and methods of Bertolt Brecht, among others, PETA includes in its repertoire translations of Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *The Life of Galileo Galilei*.

More importantly, PETA has developed process workshops to support the development of community theaters in the Philippines. Called the Basic Integrated Theater Arts Workshop (BITAW), it is a three-day intensive people's theater course for students, teachers, urban poor, workers or the religious which has made the rounds of communities, workplaces and schools nationwide.

Devised for "the creative communal search for solution of communal problems," the Augusto Boal-inspired BITAW aims to develop the individual and the community's artistic and organizational skills as well as level of social awareness (Labad, 20). It also aims to rekindle an appreciation of and love for local culture (Labad, 22).

The multidimensional language of theater is used to improvise oppressive situations they find themselves in and search for alternatives. This way, they become aware of the manifestations of an unjust social order and are able to articulate a longing for justice and faith in change (Labad, 20). Theater then serves as a creative platform of social issues and a harbinger of hope (Labad, 20).

The replication of BITAW in different parts of the country has not only produced individuals who have a grasp of their capacities and strengths but also groups, collectives who aim to use theater for conscientization—education, enlightenment and action (Labad, 22). One of the individuals is Karl Gaspar and one of the groups, the Tagum Social Action Center of the Maryknoll Fathers in Mindanao.

Revolutionary Theater, 1969–72

Nationalist consciousness eventually manifested itself in militant street actions by students and workers in the late 1960s and escalated in the first three months of 1970. Labelled the First Quarter

Storm, it was a turbulent period marked by vociferous protests against the end of American neocolonial control of the Philippines and the curtailment of the monopoly of political and economic power by the native ruling class and the enjoyment by the masses of democracy (Lumbera and Lumbera 1982, 106). These "days of disquiet, nights of rage" transformed the anatomy of theater.

The FQS engendered the revolutionary theater, one of the forms of student and worker activism.

It was committed to informing people of their rights, of the exploitation perpetrated against them of all the *isms* ranged against them (imperialism, capitalism, feudalism, fascism, bureaucrat capitalism), of their own ignorance of the graft and corruption in the government. It was theater meant not only to entertain and inform but also to persuade and activate (Fernandez 1980, 415).

Theater left the proscenium stage and joined its numerous audience of militant students, teachers and laborers in the marketplaces, factories, strike areas and streets. It did away with expensive theater accoutrements such as lights and lighting systems, stage sets and fancy costumes, and instead utilized the so-called aesthetics of poverty, i.e., involving found objects and indigenous materials in theater practice as well as "keeping simple but strong visual statements, through color and texture as extensions of a play's different levels of contradictions" (Torres 1989, 145).

Social realism was supplemented by styles and techniques such as the Peking opera, the theater of the absurd, Brecht's epic theater and expressionism, which popularized the use of choruses and of minimal props and sets.

In its aesthetic and authorial ideologies, i.e., content, technique and stagecraft, *raison d'etre*, temper and attitudes of its participants, the revolutionary theater was very different from the earlier theaters (Patajo-Legasto 1988, 219).

Furthermore, as part of the revolutionary culture or counterculture, theater was assigned an overtly political role (Patajo-Legasto 1988, 219). Jose Ma. Sison articulated the tasks of cadres in the cultural field in his *Struggle for a National Democracy*:

Revolutionary culture is a powerful revolutionary weapon . . . preparing the ground ideologically before the revolution comes. (Patajo-Legasto 1988, 219)

The theater practitioners of the revolutionary theater were theater troupes from within the cultural bureaus of militant student organizations who presented agit-prop plays bursting with ideological calls for struggle. Theater here became an instrument for the liberation of the majority of Filipinos.

Plays were written in Pilipino and by collectives, i.e., the hierarchies so visible in the bourgeois theater in English, which had the so-called producers at the top, were torn down so writers, directors, actors, dancers, stage designers could work together to write and meld the play into one that was artistically and ideologically astute. This theater bridged the gap between and among theater performers and mass audiences.

Plays were in the vernacular and were brief, portable and political (Fernandez 1984, 373). They were overtly propagandistic, antiestablishment and directly confrontational (Patajo-Legasto 1988, 283). Gintong Silahis portrays the events of the Diliman Commune in *Barikada* (1971). Kamanyang players reenacts the bloody confrontation of Malacañang armed forces and the nationalist students in *Battle of Mendiola* (1970) (Patajo-Legasto 1988, 238). Panday Sining's presentation of *Welga, Welga* by Bonifacio Ilagan, recognized as "the model play for the working class," shows the politicalization of sugar factory workers concomitant with two *welga* and two workers' unions (Patajo-Legasto 1988, 251, 255). Theater became an ideological tool in the service of the national liberation struggle (Patajo-Legasto 1988, 228).

An Emancipated Theater in an Era of Authoritarianism, 1973-85

The overtly political theater of the First Quarter Storm gave way to one more subtle with the declaration of martial law, the attendant persecution of anti-establishment individuals and organizations, and the consequent dissemination of the New Society ideology. Art and media were muzzled but theater survived. Blossomed even. Motivated by the fiery spirit of the revolutionary theater, it resisted the so-called national culture that the Marcoses were promoting vigorously.

More creative forms of expression were employed to counter the imposed national culture housed so elegantly at the Cultural Center of the Philippines. Taking the country by storm were historical, ethnic, Pilipino musical, the contemporized traditional and the revived

and improved agit-prop plays now renamed *dulansangan*. One of the most significant changes was the shift from English to Pilipino for the predominant language of the theater.

Because theater at this juncture could not be as confrontational as the one before it, Fernandez (1984, 373-74) calls it "the literature of indirection" and identifies the three principal avenues of protest as history, social realism and tradition.

Nicanor Tiongson's *Pilipinas Circa 1907* (1982) and *Panunuluyan* (1979) use traditional genres, a Pilipino musical (i.e., *sarsuwela*, popular in the American colonial period) and a Christmas play (oft-performed since the Spanish colonial rule) as vehicles for contemporary messages. *Pilipinas Circa 1907* attacks subservience to things American and hails the nationalist movement in a lively dramatic form. *Panunuluyan* uses Joseph's and Mary's search for lodgings on Christmas eve to politicize the audience. The use of tradition makes for timely theater firmly linked with the past (Fernandez 1984, 373-74).

The ethnic play, *Halik sa Kampilan* (1978) popularizes an indigenous folk form, *bayok*, to tell the story of a Muslim community that resists foreign intervention at all costs.

Social realism and history join forces in Al Santos's *Mayo A-Beinte-Uno Atbp. Kabanata* (1977). A play about Valentin de los Santos and Lapiang Malaya, it shows the State's coercive power against those who dare buck the system. Here, Al Santos invites the audience to see parallels between the past and the present and to understand contemporary problems from the historical account (Patajo-Legasto 1988, 291 and Fernandez 1980, 417). Brecht's epic theater also provided valuable inputs to the theater of this period. The distance-creating devices which have been integrated into Philippine political theater are: (1) the *dula-tula*; (2) the use of folk materials; (3) multimedia devices; (4) partial or full choruses; (5) the maximization of gestures, e.g., mime show; (6) skits of little narratives and songs; (7) stylized movements and scenic designs; and (8) the suggestive use of space (Torres 1989, 142).

Social problems like poverty, corruption in the government, political and military abuses, and dispossession of small farmers and tribal minorities by multinational agribusiness corporations impelled religious orders to help form grassroots movements which stressed Christian community values and human rights. Catalysts were the Vatican II documents which encouraged lay participation in the Church business and the emerging liberation consciousness in Latin America which took a radical stance in solidarity with the poor and

explicitly identified colonialism and neocolonialism as the direct causes of exploitation (Van Erven 1986, 7)

Being Freire's prophetic church, the Philippine Catholic Church countered the sociopolitical upheavals manifest in the 1960s with a program "aimed at building active Christian communities committed to the transformation of the world and the promotion of Christian values which are the bases for the true dignity and freedom of man." Called basic Christian community-community organizing (BCC-CO), it was aided by community theater. Community theater, especially in Visayas and Mindanao, was then born under the aegis of the church. Radical politics and religion were then fused in theater. In Negros, for example, Fr. Alan Abadesco founded the Negros Theater League in 1976. Envisioned as an alternative vehicle for evangelization, it developed into a full-fledged community-based political theater network (Van Erven 62). Abadesco decries increased militarization against their ranks but like Gramsci before him, maintains that "the answer is the development of strategies and tactics for forming and forging solidarity among alliances, not only among city-based theater groups but also among those in towns, regions, and the nation as a whole" (Van Erven, 62). In Davao, Karl Gaspar produced plays that tackle justice and peace issues with the help of fiery Old Testament texts. Likewise, Fr. Rodulfo Galenzoga, armed as he was with "a sense of mission, the Bible and his art," presented plays telling of local sociopolitical conditions" (Temple 1980, 10-11).

At the same time, cultural groups of this period, secular and otherwise, engaged in the "decentralization" of theater: cultural workers in theater brought their practice to the dominated masses throughout the archipelago where they initiated more imaginative means of raising people's consciousness and provided support in organizing efforts.

This move proved to be effective, especially in the light of the events in 1983, i.e., the Aquino assassination on 21 August 1983, the yellow Fridays and other mass actions as well as the concomitant EDSA revolution in 1985.

People's theater awakened the revolutionary potential of the masses. A necessary evil, however, was the harassment of the cultural workers by the military and police. These instruments of coercive power tortured, 'salvaged,' arrested these activists, knowing full well the organizing capacity of the community theater groups. But these cultural workers refused to be cowed: they came up with alternative ways of expressing key issues and urgent tasks for Philip-

pine society (Torres 1989, 141). They presented plays and conducted theater workshops. In the 1980s, especially during the turbulent period from December 1985 to February 1986, the plays presented ranged from satirical agit-prop pieces to sophisticated realistic three-act dramas and multimedia rock musicals (Van Erven, 57). The premier street theater group, which was based in the University of the Philippines, the UP Peryante, went into lightning performances. Spun off from Boal's invisible theater, their presentations erupted in venues other than stages, i.e., marketplaces and sidewalks. With "light masks, throwaway props and little or no costuming," they did not arouse the suspicion of the police easily and involve the people in the vicinity (Van Erven, 63). The theater group's coup was a performance inside the Bicutan prison for political detainees in 1984. The cultural workers faked identity papers of inmates' relatives, arrived separately on a lazy Sunday afternoon and performed a biting satire of the Marcos regime in the prison dining hall (Van Erven, 63). They escaped before the prison wardens could find out what was going on, leaving encouraged inmates behind (Van Erven, 63). The effects of this performance lasted long after it had ended (Boal 1979, 144).

Other realistic plays dealt with the land issue. The UP Los Baños Teatro Umaluhokan's *Kontradiksiyon* (1985) highlighted the basic contradiction between the political interests of the ruling class and the workers (Van Erven, 65). Very like many of Gaspar's plays in Mindanao, *Kontradiksiyon* tells of the eviction of a poor peasant family from its land for the benefit of a multinational corporation (Van Erven, 65).

The multimedia rock musical *Nukleyar* (1983) is written and directed by PETA's Al Santos. Music is by Joey Ayala and choreography by Maribel Legarda. Powerful images point to the senselessness of the nuclear arms race, and more importantly, reveal and condemn the ill-advised construction of a nuclear power plant in Morong, Bataan that stem from the collusion of transnational capitalist forces. The plays became the best medium for spreading alternative points of view (Van Erven, 58).

Moreover, people's theater workshops conducted throughout the archipelago increased the political awareness of the urban poor, farm workers, unemployed or striking factory workers and students (Van Erven, 58).

Theater was relatively freer in the years following the overthrow of Marcos' rule, but one important task remains undone—liberation. The need for vigilance and positive action for change is imperative

as long as institutions of oppression stay in place. To this day, theater continues to function as a tool and rehearsal for revolution for the oppressed as they learn to perform their stories themselves to gear up for the struggle for liberation.

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