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Notes and Comments

The Komedya: Folk Drama and Total Communication

DOREEN G. FERNANDEZ

The Philippine *komedya*, which derives its name from the Spanish *comedia* (a full-length play in verse), is well known for being formulaic and stylized. The formula is always thus: kingdoms, Moro and Christian, are ranged against each other in love and in war; the resolution to all the conflicts and obstacles is obtained by having the wars end, the enemies reconciled, and the Moros converted so that they can marry their Christian loves – and presumably live in imagined peace ever after. The stylization is visually splendid – Christians plumed and gallooned in blue and purple; Moros arrogant in reds and oranges; battles set to music; words of love not just spoken, but declaimed; tournaments and marching; entrances and exits that are flourished befitting royalty.

With the plots dictated by formulae, and the staging style decided upon ages ago, one may wonder what, if anything, the *komedya* still can communicate. Surely the stories about Moro-Christian conflict, about Christian princes kneeling at the feet of Moro princesses, or of Moro princes holding out their swords to Christian princesses, or arrogant sultans eventually converted to the true faith – have all been told in the centuries and decades in which the *komedya* has played at fiestas all over the country? Surely all the possible variations on its *magia* (flying eagles, spouting waterfalls, damsels discovered within giant flowers) and all the possible variants on its stories (whales swallowing kings and angels

or crosses appearing in the sky) have been tried out by the folk poets writing for the town fiestas of all those years?

This note proposes that the real communication in a komedya is not made from the stage, but from in front of it, in back of it, around it; and that finally what is being said on stage is only partially the story of a play, but is more truly the story of a community in interaction.

KOMEDYA IN SAN DIONISIO, PARAÑAQUE

Let us take a komedya called "Princesa Miramar at Principe Leandro"¹ staged in San Dionisio, Parañaque, as a case study in communication. Written "around 1920," the play as play is about Princesa Miramar of Persia whom Principe Leandro of Albanya wins in a *torneo*. His father, Haring Felipo is displeased at his marrying a Moro princess, and orders Leandro imprisoned. The Sultan declares that he will avenge this insult to his daughter, and sends his sister, Sultana Salimar of Arabia, to demand Felipo's apology. The latter refuses, and war is declared. In the meantime, Princesa Florita of Albanya, looking for her new sister-in-law Miramar, encounters Principe Ramir in the forest, and falls in love.

Similarly, Principe Rolante of Arabia encounters and falls in love with Princesa Armida of Arabia, daughter of Salimar. The three kingdoms meet in war, which ends in a truce, since the princes and princesses plead with their parents to come to an agreement and establish peace. Haring Felipo repents of his anger, and kills himself. Reyna Carmela laments, but decides it would be best to have the young people married. She is reminded that the Moslems must first be baptized. The young people agree, but Sultan Graturko refuses, saying that if the Christian God was the true god, why did he not bring Haring Felipo back to life? Thunder and lightning and a cross in the sky proclaim a miracle. Haring Felipo comes back to life, and the play ends with the promise of conversion and marriage.

The plot of this komedya is faithful to the formula, and almost predictable. It proves itself a contemporary komedya, since the Moros aren't all evil nor the Christians all good, as they once were

1. Arcadio Marquez, "Princesa Miramar at Principe Leandro," typescript, ca. 1920.

pictured. Considering that the komedya is folk drama that has lasted for at least a century in the barrios and towns of the Philippines,² a tradition strengthened through the years, and even taken along by Filipinos transplanted to Hawaii – what is it communicating that its audience and participants find valuable and relevant? How can it be read?

THE TEXT

The first reading of komedya is made, of course, through the words of the text. On the surface, the words are telling the story of Leandro and Miramar, and thus communicating the interest of the playwright and his audience in romances, battles, and the fates of royalty in imagined European kingdoms. Beneath this interest, one may perhaps read an aspect of colonial values, e.g., admiration of European royalty. In the choice, positioning and interpretation of the words, however, native values may be seen.

Values standard to the komedya are there because they are standard to the folk writers and audiences. Among these are honor:

Dangal, sampong buhay aking pinuhunan
matamo ka lamang pangarap sa buhay. (p. 22)
(Honor as well as life, I have staked
just to win my life's dream.)

There is also the respect due King and parent (“Haring Ama ko na iginagalang” – respected King and father) and friend (“Katotong Lizardo na iginagalang” – respected bosom friend, Lizardo).

A large part of the plot, of the lines, and thus the primal place, is of course given to love, whose dominance of the komedya plot betrays its dominant position in Filipino feelings. In the komedya, love, (“pagsintang lubos”) must be expressed, then reciprocated, and never denied. Because of its absence is unbearable:

Nanga saan kayo lilong kamatayan
at di pa tapusin yaring aking buhay
O palad na lihis saan pa hahanggan
yaring obeja mong sawing kapalaran. (p. 28)

2. Cf. Nicanor G. Tiongson, *Kasaysayan ng Komedya sa Pilipinas: 1766-1982* (Manila: De La Salle University, 1982).

(Where are you, treacherous death
 that you do not yet end this my life
 O fortune gone astray, where else can I go,
 this lamb of yours, beset with misfortune.)

and the death of a loved one tantamount to one's own death.

More importantly, love is the ordering principle that transcends the reigning prohibition between Moro and Cristiano, which governs most komedyas, and causes wars and parental conflicts, because, as Florita and Rolante tell Haring Felipo:

Sa gawang pagibig lahat pantay-pantay
 walang inuuri maging sino pa man
 Moro ma't Kristianong may dangal na taglay
 dapat na igalang ng sandaigdigan. (p. 15)
 (In this matter of love all are equal;
 no one is classified or excluded;
 Moro or Christian is possessed of honor
 that the whole world should respect.)

Values of heroism are also communicated in the *batalya* or battle scenes. The qualities of maleness and heroism — assumed to go together — are both stated and implied in battle scenes, as well as in the preparation for these, when vaunts and threats fly. The warrior's *sigla* (liveliness, agility), *dahas* (daring, ferocity), *tapang at lakas* (bravery and strength) are spoken of. His lance thirsts for blood (“uhaw na pika”); his sword flashes like lightning, and his dagger knows no pause (“taga at ulos na walang pagitan”). Heroism in the komedya, therefore, means physical daring, agility and skill, grace, respect for rule and form, and honor.

The other side of the coin — villainy — is outlined and communicated again and again by a lexicon of phrases that occur in every komedya, and often — at least seventy times in “Princesa Miramar.” These are words that draw the face of villainy: *lilo*, *bulaan*, *hunghang*, *uslak*, *suwail*, *sukab*, *palamara*, *tampalasan*, *taksil*, *kuhila mahalay*, *sinungaling*, *palalo*, *sulupika*, *pangahas*, *ulul*.

These words in every komedya may seem like ritual name-calling to an audience used to hearing them punctuate plays they have heard all their lives, or to an audience to whom the words no longer mean anything, so thoroughly have their edges been rubbed blunt by the years. However, examined in the light of the 1754

Vocabulario de la Lengua Tagala,³ and with the knowledge that once they must have been fresh, accurate and pointed, one realizes that they communicate what it is to be a villain: to be lying, ungrateful and treacherous; also arrogant and audacious; double-dealing and dishonest; rude and cruel, unmotivated by respect and honor.

Finally, an important value communicated by the play is harmony. The *soldados* or *concejeros* always express agreement with the wishes or commands expressed by the King; so do parents and children. The forty-one such statements in "Princesa Miramar" can perhaps be read not only as expressing a harmony of purposes, a unity, expressed and explicit, with the one commanding or desiring or inviting, but also the importance of harmony in human relations, a value that translates into the *pakikisama* of Philippine community life.

The above — honor, respect, love, and harmony; heroism versus villainy — certainly are communicated by the play. They serve as affirmation, telling komedya audiences through the years and throughout the islands that these are what Filipinos — and the European royalty of the play — hold dear and important; these are ordering principles for their lives. When, at the end of the komedya, the princesses marry their princes, it seems a vindication of faith, of loyalty to ideals; it seems like a reward for being good and holding true.

THE STAGING AS COMMUNICATION

The komedya words and the values they bear, are further reinforced by the acting and staging conventions of the komedya. The marching, without which no komedya entrance or exit is made; the color of the costumes (black and blue for Cristiano, red and orange for Moro); the choreographed *batalya* with the clashing swords, lances and daggers striking to music — all communicate the spirit of gallantry and heroism to which the komedya lines pay homage. The stage (permanent and very large in San Dionisio), with its palatial backdrop with a door for the Moros and one for the Cristianos, and a balcony to be shared, tells us that the difference between Moro and Cristiano is not

3. Juan de Noceda and Pedro de San Lucar, *Vocabulario de la Lengua Tagala* (Manila: Impresa de Ramirez y Giraudier, 1860 [first published 1754]).

ideological, but defined by externals (onstage door, costume, manner) and easily dissolved.

One must add the production practices: the wooden swords, the batalya thrusts and parries (using the movements of *arnis* and the rhythms of *paso doble*) – the paraphernalia of love and war, the prerequisites of honor and bravery. There are also the visual elements – the formations, the headdresses, the marching patterns, the visual splendor – also communicating the ways of royalty, whose values are trumpeted by the komedya courts and tournament fields. The magic effects that so enchanted past audiences, the discovery that a brave warrior is a lovely woman in disguise, with whom to promptly fall in love – these are trappings of a magic world in which love always wins, honor is never shadowed by shame, and the brave are duly rewarded.

Perhaps it is actually the staging as gesture that is better read by the audience than the lines which, in dodecasyllabic verse fed by a prompter, are not always easy to catch. But the staging is non-verbal language that the Filipino audience reads easily and enthusiastically. The color, the swagger, the poses, the emotional situations, the marching style communicate as clearly as words (or perhaps more clearly than words could) the love and honor, bravery and harmony that rule the komedya world, and by extension, the real world its audiences hope for.

THE KOMEDYA WORLD OFFSTAGE

I propose, however, that, sufficient unto a play though that may seem, that is not all. All that is actually taken for granted, and seen as very reassuring, the komedya taken as an oft-told tale that comforts because it always ends the same way, with everyone “living happily ever after.” Still more communication goes on behind the stage, and this is not formulaic or predictable, but always hoped for and, to some extent, trusted in. In back of the komedya stage, what is happening is: production and its accompanying dynamics, which bears looking into.

“Princesa Miramar” was last staged on 15 May 1982, as the yearly komedya of Barrio San Dionisio, Parañaque, Metro Manila. At first it seemed that there might not be a komedya that year, since the *hermano mayor* slated to fund the year’s play had backed out because of the economic situation. However, another

hermano was found. Jerry Santiago (who was running for a political position in the local elections scheduled for the Monday following) spent some ₱12,000 for the play, and the *hermana* mayor, Miss Cruz spent an undisclosed amount on food for the participants of both play and procession preceding.

The position of *hermano* and *hermana* is one of prestige in San Dionisio, winning regard, affection, and remembrance. The mayor and the older residents can name the patrons of the last ten years, as well as the komedyas they sponsored. The choice of the year's komedya is the privilege of the patron. It is said that the act of funding a komedya is a lucky undertaking, that draws blessings on the patron. Barrio residents tell of rich men and women who have been enriched even further, after acting as *hermano* or *hermana*. The position has always had takers, even in somewhat difficult times.

If the funding belongs to the elite *hermano* and *hermana*, the staging, meaning all the production work of the komedya, is the task, responsibility, and joy of a *Komite ng Matatandang Lalake at Babae*, a devoted group of former *komedyant*es. They schedule and conduct rehearsals, act as prompters, cooks, wardrobe attendants, runners of errands, ushers, stagehands, extras, and do whatever else is needed — e.g. keeping in line the excited boys who creep up the stairs to watch *batalya*, till they are practically at the prince's boots. They also cast the production, by suggesting to friends, friends' sons or daughters, out-of-school youth, "tambays" (observers, or "stand-by's") and such, that they might want to join the komedya. They of course pick the princesses (without auditioning), and go to their parents to "ask for their hands" as princesses, and allay their fears about expense and lack of ability.

Long before the rehearsals begin, the process has started, when the *hermano* and *hermana* are chosen (usually at komedya time the year before), the script selected, and the princesses formally sought. The princesses then start planning the dresses with which they are going to stun the barrio (and which are kept as secret as Princess Diana's wedding gown), while their parents calculate how many changes of costume the family budget will allow.

Hermie Hernandez, director, is well known in San Dionisio, not only because he works for the cooperative that has made the barrio both wealthy and a model of its kind, but especially be-

cause he was one of the best komedya princes of the past, and has been directing ever since he became too old for *principe* roles. His son Rodante, named for one of his komedya roles of the fifties, played one of the lead roles in "Miramar."

The actors were a mixture of elder actors who had been in past komedyas, some of whom had now been promoted to the roles of kings, caliphs, priests and giants; and younger actors who were playing the princes and princesses, the knights and concejeros. A study of the community and its komedya by Nicanor Tiongson⁴ showed that, for one komedya in 1976 ("Principe Reynaldo"), the roster of actors included: girls from exclusive schools, bank employees, salesmen, a jeepney driver, a policeman, a butcher, factory workers, radio personalities, an engineer, waiters, and unemployed youth.

The komedya is staged yearly in the barrio as a commitment to the patron saint, San Dionisio, who, popular belief has it, picked the spot for the stage, and so favors the komedya that if another type of play is offered instead, he causes rain to fall on the feast. Many actors take part in the play to fulfill promises made to the saint in return for favors (health, a job, a son). Many princesses agree to join because of the belief that refusing San Dionisio will cause one to fall ill – of an illness which only the oil of San Dionisio can cure.

Other tasks connected with the production are farmed out as the committee sees fit. The large piece of scenery that depicts the facade of a castle, and is equipped with a balcony from which to view tournaments, and with catwalks in back that make possible seemingly daredevil, cliff-hanging stage business, is built by carpenters from the community who donate their time. Some wood may be bought with the hermano's money, but often much of it is borrowed from lumber yards. Props such as high-backed chairs for royalty and potted plants to represent gardens for romance, are borrowed from the homes of San Dionisio residents. The band, year after year, is of course the San Dionisio band.

The audience is led by the patrons – the hermano and the hermana and their families, the mayor and his family, past and future hermanos and hermanas. But the real core of the audience is com-

4. Nicanor G. Tiongson, "Kasaysayan at Estetika ng Komedya sa Paranaque" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of the Philippines, 1979).

posed of the old men and women who had wakened to the komedya ("nagisnan ko," is the expression they use), who have known it since birth. They come in early to reserve seats, equipped with bottles of coffee, dragging grandchildren and nieces and nephews, audibly reminiscing about the komedyas they have seen or acted in. Around them are flocks of children, clambering on top of parked jeeps, sitting three to a chair, climbing up San Dionisio's chapel and causing the bell to ring in their excitement, crowding the band, creeping up on the stage when the elders aren't watching, and rooting loudly for their favorite princes, the town's folk heroes.⁵

The production of the komedya is a communication of the community solidarity of the barrio, and also of its faith. The production staff and the sponsors undertake the painstaking details of a production not only because of San Dionisio, called Tata Dune by the barrio, but because of each other. The elite give money, the young give talent, the Komite ng Matatanda give their time and experience. The hermano and hermana communicate their ties to the rest of the barrio, their gratitude for their good fortune, their hope that luck may continue. The young, college graduates, with professions that take them away from the salt air of San Dionisio, take on roles in the komedya, thus conveying their sense of brotherhood, their *pakikisama*, sometimes their aspirations (as when the role is a *panata* to the saint). The actors from all social levels are not only speaking to the saint, but to the community as well, of their bonds and hopes. The Komite members are the keepers of the tradition, expressing their belief in San Dionisio, its shared history, its active present, and its joint future. In front of the stage is a whole community, sitting not only as audience, but as guardians of the form, its meaning, and the values it encases and also as a community bonded together by many things (history, economy, society, spirit), including the komedya.

The faith the community holds together is not only in San Dionisio's keeping the rain (and the illness, the misfortune, the bad luck) away, but in each other. There is faith that the audience will come, as they have all through the years; that next year the lumber yards will again lend lumber for the stage, and the carpenters will volunteer their services; that an hermano and hermana

5. Data on the San Dionisio Komedya tradition was obtained from interviews, attendance at Komedyas during the last decade, and the Tiongson study.

from the barrio elite will fund the play and the food; that the old komedyantes will keep things going; that the rich, the middle class and the poor will pitch in as actors, or as sources for props and materials; that San Dionisio will have his procession and his komedya as a pledge from the community.

In the faith is the community solidarity. The play is not only an evening's entertainment or a commitment to the patron saint, but also a chapter in community history. Arcadio Marquez, the septagenarian author of the play, is the son of a komedya writer; his son is an actor in his play. "Princesa Miramar" is a thread in a web of community relations and interaction; a link in a continuum of feasting and celebration; an echo and development of barrio theatre practice. A shared past, a present shaped together, a community trust in the future — this is what is communicated from the back of the stage where the actors dress and the stage manager rules, and from the front of the stage where the audience, the author, the director and the prompter sit.

It is a message of reassurance, surely more momentous and of greater impact than that of love and harmony in the imagined kingdoms of Albanya, Arabia and Persia. It is the message every Filipino seeks — the message of his meaning and belonging.

The komedya, therefore — and in extension most folk drama — should be seen as total communication. In front of, in back of, and on stage, the komedya communicates at various levels and in a multitude of ways, messages that actors, staff and audience read not only with eyes and ears, but even more clearly with intuition, memory, and faith. Understanding the ways and the effectivity of this communication is a means towards understanding not only folk drama, or even community dynamics, but also the means and methods of Filipino communication — through the words, behind and under the words, in the gestures, in the very doing — communication conscious, unconscious, and ongoing.