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The Short, Short Life of Citizen Juan

Review Author: Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.

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hopes that more legal scholars take up the never-ending task which the author has so admirably assumed.

RUBEN T. BALANE
DEOGRACIAS T. REYES

THE SHORT, SHORT LIFE OF CITIZEN JUAN: A Play in Three Acts. By Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1971. 82 pp.

I

The Short, Short Life of Citizen Juan was begun in 1968 and completed while the author was in the Playwrights' Workshop at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Connecticut in 1970. The Play was produced in Manila in connection with the Third World Theater Festival on November 25-27, 1971 under the direction of Behn Cervantes and with Nestor Torre, Jr. and Dayang-Dayang in the leading roles. The play was printed by the University of the Philippines Press in 1971. It is clear that Mrs. Bonifacio has written a piece of propaganda. It is not clear, however, whether she wanted to paint a portrait or write an allegory.

Rosalinda L. Orosa, in an article on "The Guerilla Theatre in the Philippines", (*Asian Pacific Quarterly*, Vol. 3 No. 2, pp. 43-50), has said that "The Second propaganda movement in the Philippines is on." *Citizen Juan* is not Guerilla Theater, but it is propaganda. Mrs. Bonifacio's purpose is clearly political and social reform. Her hero is Citizen Juan, a man of the people, "Kasama... Poor... Kapatid... Apo... Leader!" (Act I, Scene 2). Her villain is Don Mundo. "Don't be a child, Juan, I never lose an election as you know... You, Juan, happened to stand in my way..." (Act III, Scene 4). "And the richest man in this town, woman, the richest man will smile his nicest smile! Because... because... by then... he owns us all! All! Every goddamned man! Every goddamned woman!... Every goddamned child!" (Act III, Scene 3). The pawns in the middle are Sima, Juan's wife, and his unborn child. "There's us... the child. That's everything." (Act III, Scene 3) The conclusion is the expected one—prayers for the dead, and flickering candles in the darkness as the curtain falls.

If Mrs. Bonifacio intended to paint a portrait her hand has faltered, and the resulting picture is blurred. It is, I imagine, a portrait of Citizen Juan. At least that is what the title tells us. But Juan never comes alive because he is not real. The Juan of Act I, Scene 3, deeply in love with Sima, young, romantic, idealistic ("A girl! My girl will give

me a girl! Scent of papaya blossoms in my house! A girl!) is simply not believable as the Juan of Act III, Scene 4. ("Let go! Whore! [He strikes her] *Putal!*"). The change, of course, can underline the blackness of the villain Don Mundo who has caused all this, but it also exposes a horrible flaw in the man who is supposed to be hero, man of the people, a Don Quixote tilting at impossible windmills. Character has been bent to serve either the melodrama of the scene or the propaganda of the play. Juan has become a stereotype, a caricature in his own way, almost as much a villain as Don Mundo. We can be moved by what Juan stands for—the struggle of the common man against the forces of oppression—but not by Juan himself as a man.

The play, however, almost succeeds as Allegory. The frame of dancers and bamboo clappers at the beginning and the end of the play, and the words of the offstage voice ("But we know how mixed up some of them are! "Now—let me see, she told me to tell you that the setting of her play is *any Philippine town*. And, oh yes, the time is *now* and the characters are actually all of us—yes, *you and I*."") point to the allegory. The chorus of Townspeople in Act I, Scene 2, and the clever use of the split stage with the Ladies and Gentlemen in Act III, Scene 4 operate quite successfully on the symbolic level. The *albulario* as clown, and the child who is to be are effective counterpoints to the tragedy of a man and a woman who are swept into waters that are over their heads. Perhaps it is the child, the girl of the papaya blossoms, who waits to be born and never comes to life who is the basic image in the allegory. The girl is never born because the world is too cruel, because men value political power more than life, because townspeople will be bought by campaign funds and rumors rather than by love.

The real hero in the play is Sima, a Maria Clara trapped in the absurdity of a world that contradicts dream and aspiration, an anachronism in a world of political expedience. One cannot help but feel that Mrs. Bonifacio's real sympathies lie with Sima rather than with Juan. Perhaps Mrs. Bonifacio would have been more successful if she had made it Sima's play rather than Juan's. Don Mundo is a stereotype, as is Askad, and the Ladies and Gentlemen of Act III. Juan is inconsistent, but Sima almost comes alive. "It is not for me to say what you can and cannot do." (Act I, Scene 3.) "There's us... the child. That's everything." (Act III, Scene 3.) "Stop him! Ask my husband to come back!" (Act III, Scene 3.) Although she says very little it is Sima who stands at the center of the play. Perhaps Sima's funeral in the final scene is the funeral of Filipinos, which is what Citizen Juan's allegory is all about. If that is true, Juan's death is irrelevant, and it is the flickering candles—either of sorrow or of hope—that properly end the play.

Mrs. Bonifacio has a deft hand with dialogue, particularly with the feminine characters. Her ladies with their clever talk of Hongkong

shopping and sex are masterpieces, as are the choral Townspeople in the opening act. But I cannot help wondering whether the dialogue would sit better if the play had been written in Tagalog. The dialect would have also muted the melodrama of Juan's drunkenness, his murder of Don Mundo, and the death by miscarriage of Sima.

Mrs. Bonifacio has talent. *Citizen Juan*, flawed as it is, is testimony to that talent. Because of that talent we can look forward hopefully to the publication of her forthcoming long play in Pilipino. If Mrs. Bonifacio does not get lost in propaganda and sharpens her intention and her characters, it will be a play worth waiting for.

JOSEPH A. GALDON, S.J.

II

The Short, Short Life of Citizen Juan, a three-act play by Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio, essays an explanation for dissent in Philippine society—"in any Philippine town," "now," with "you and I" as characters. One may regard the scope of the author's thesis as so much cheek, or insight, but whichever way one views her purpose, there is no denying the force with which she argues her point.

Juan, the central character of the play, accedes to his townmates' demand that he run for municipal mayor (?) against Don Mundo, a landowner. Juan rapidly increases his following, forcing Don Mundo to bribe him to withdraw from the elections. Juan refuses. Askad, Don Mundo's bodyguard, then starts a smear campaign, saying that Sima, Juan's wife, is pregnant with Don Mundo's child and that Don Mundo has, in fact, deposited a large amount of money in the bank in Juan's name to keep Juan silent about the child. The smear campaign succeeds; Juan loses his supporters. Upon learning about the gossip, Juan gets drunk and accuses his wife of infidelity. Sima, who is near childbirth, is weak from excessive bleeding. Juan rushes to Don Mundo's house and finds out that his wife's alleged infidelity is part of a smear campaign. He stabs Don Mundo to death. He goes home and discovers that his wife is dead. "He reaches for a gun, tucks it under his belt, puts on a straw hat and escapes from the house."

The play ends with an image that has become a standard one in contemporary Philippine literature: the harassed citizen rushing out to the hills or wilderness with bolo, revolver, or rifle—an image of the peaceful citizen turned armed dissident. This final scene of the play contrasts effectively with Act I, scene ii, in which Juan's townmates proclaim their faith in the democratic process as a means to change the *status quo*. Don Mundo, who represents the Establishment in the play,