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The Short, Short Life of Citizen Juan

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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,

subverts this process through deceit. This subversion, however, remains unknown to the common townsfolk who think that Juan has been corrupted by the money of Don Mundo. It is Juan, in particular, who experiences most violently and comes to understand the animal-like resolution of Don Mundo to preserve the *status quo* against all attempts to change it. Thus, it is Juan who rejects the democratic process and takes to the hills. Armed dissidence, Lapeña-Bonifacio apparently says, is sought as a last resort by people like Citizen Juan after continued frustration in their peaceful attempts to improve their living conditions in Philippine society, but the author dramatizes her point forcefully.

This is no new or startling insight into the roots of armed dissidence. Half the punch of her play comes, as a matter of fact, from the ease with which she has an offstage voice announce at the very start of the play "Now—let me see, the author 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*."

The Short, Short Life of Citizen Juan is meant, then, to be a parable for the theatre. Its setting is not particularized; its characters are simply, but concisely, drawn. Juan and Don Mundo have the quality of types. The flow of the plot is intended to prove the playwright's point. Like Brecht's parables, *Short, Short Life of Citizen Juan* presents an analysis of a problem in order that the audience might note their relation to the roots of the problem and subsequently formulate a solution. The success of such a play rests ultimately in its ability to move the audience to action. But what audience, and to what action? Is the oppressed peasant the play's intended audience? If so, then is the play for armed dissidence as a solution? Only as a last resort, it seems, and even then, this is really not too clear, since Juan packs his gun apparently more out of vengeance than out of the conviction that it is useless to change an oppressive social system peacefully. As a matter of fact, the failure of democracy in Lapeña-Bonifacio's Philippine town may be blamed as much on the credulity of the farmers as on the deceitfulness of Don Mundo. The turning point of Juan's campaign, it must be remembered, comes when his townmates unquestioningly believe the smear campaign against Juan. Armed dissidence is not *clearly* presented as the only solution possible to establishmentarian oppression.

But then one really does not get the impression that Lapeña-Bonifacio is selling revolution; it is safer to say that her play warns about revolution. The ruling elite is shown as responsible for creating an atmosphere for armed dissidence. The play's warning, then, is directed either at the ruling elite (who are then, in this case, being asked to change of themselves) or at the educated bourgeoisie (who could warn the ruling elite or help the oppressed peasant to work more successfully for social change but through peaceful means). Either way, the peasant comes out as needful of outside help. This outlook on the peasant is

questionable, as is the implicit belief that change should come from the top to avoid a revolution. But then this is really the playwright's own business, and as far as her play is concerned, it warns about revolution and warns well. What could, however, distract from the warning are the little "human-interest" details in the characters, such as the sweetish dialogue at the start of Act I, scene iii, and the flashback scene in the same act, but this is really a moot point till viewed in production. (This reviewer had not seen the premiere production of *Short, Short Life of Citizen Juan*.) Otherwise, the play is well constructed.

Act III, scene ix, is a particularly deft piece of playwriting. Two groups are presented on stage: four ladies playing mahjong and four gentlemen discussing the elections. The lines of one group intersperse the lines of the other, and as they talk on a variety of topics, delineating more and more clearly the decadence of the ruling elite, their lines comment, reinforce, and contrast with each other, resulting in a rich textural effect which stands out because of the simplicity of the preceding scenes. The final scene of the play which follows is also resultantly emphasized, being even more stark than any before it.

Unfortunately, Lapeña-Bonifacio chose to attack the Establishment in English, which effectively limits her audience to the upper classes and faces any cast with the very heavy burden of creating believable English-speaking rural characters. *Short, Short Life of Citizen Juan* belongs to the moribund tradition of Filipino theatre in English, and its language deflates it into an innocuous piece of socially committed theatre despite the competence of the writing. A translation into any of the native languages would and should more than double its force and, doubtless, turn it into a theatre piece worthy of apprehension from the Establishment.

PAUL A. DUMOL

III

In the last scene of *The Short, Short Life of Citizen Juan*, the hero comes home after having killed a man. He takes a last look at his dead wife, tucks a gun into his belt and flees into the night.

It is a properly dramatic but ambiguous ending. It is ambiguous because we do not know what Juan will do when he steps off the stage. Will he come back another day to overthrow his oppressors? Or has despair driven him to a life of banditry and violence directed at his own kind? The ending does not tell us.

Juan is the unsubtle symbol for the Filipino common man—the *tao*. *The Short, Short Life of Citizen Juan* is the story of his impotence to