

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

The Play's the Thing

Rolando S. Tinio

Philippine Studies vol. 12, no. 2 (1964): 277–287

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

The Play's The Thing *

ROLANDO S. TINIO

THERE IS a gentleman's agreement among the playwright, the stage artist and the playgoer that the play's the thing and all the stage is a world where actors play their parts as the playwright wrote them. Only the playwright's meaning can catch the conscience of a paying clientele.

No doubt, if the playwright had not merely written words on reams of paper but, like Hamlet, had a troupe of actors around him whom he could lecture to and oversee; that is to say, were the playwright himself the chief stage artist, as the orator is at once the writer and the performer of his oration, the problem of mounting a play would be reduced to the problem of social organization and private coaching. But Hamlet's case—like that of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Molière, Shakespeare—is a rarity in the history of drama. Even there, one must merely suppose that the original production of *Oedipus Turannos* or *Macbeth* was its ideal performance, and subsequent productions can only hope to approximate the breadth and depth and height of that affair.

And yet, when one sits back to consider that the genius of the dramatist—the genius for embodying theme through character and action and in evocative language—is quite alien to, though not by any means exclusive of the genius of the *régisseur*—the genius for realizing a literary concept in non-

* Mr. Tinio recently staged a *Macbeth* which called forth anguished cries that whatever it was, it wasn't Shakespeare. He discusses here some of the thinking behind his unusual production.—EDITORS' NOTE.

literary terms, in the elements of physical time and physical space which circumscribe the arts of acting, music and dance, painting and architecture—one wonders indeed how much more awesome the original *Oedipus* might have been, did Sophocles have a friend named Alexis Minotis, or the original *Macbeth*, did the Chamberlain's Men have Tyrone Guthrie in its employ. I do not discount the possibility that Sophocles and Shakespeare might have been geniuses of the theatre as well as of drama; I wish merely to suggest the possibility that they were not.

But I have been quibbling. The distinction between theatre and drama is a contemporary bias which could not have affected either of these worthies. Until the emergence of the *régisseur* towards the turn of the present century, hardly any distinction was made between production design and stage management; for that matter, between elocution and acting, or between costuming and dressing up.

Until then, the mounted play was little more than an ensemble of declaimers for whom rules had been codified by Betterton and Talma and Goethe (though perhaps it was the dancing master Delsarte whose influence reached out, through elocution classes, to most of the English-speaking world). Those declaimers *emoted* (*acting* is actually a modern concept) through whirlwinds of passion, they wielded their voices with the virtuosity of coloratura singers, and they move about according to a fixed system of carefully studied gestures. They dressed with taste (more often to indicate the financial standing of the company); they were backed by formal or descriptive scenery; and, if they were lit artificially, lighting served the purposes of visibility and nothing else. In every case, staging was at heart the recitation of the playwright's text. The play played itself, as it were.

Vestiges of this approach to play production remain formidable in this country. The playgoer still goes to the theatre to hear the play spoken; hence the premium placed on skillful phonics. If in addition the playgoer gets productional pyrotechnics with his fare of well-shaped vowels and consonants, he is either irritated—if he is traditionalist (since he can't hear the

play and look at the stage without losing track of one or the other)—or—if he happens to be radical—he is truly grateful for the bonus number you append, but you really didn't have to.

I wonder if I might point out without impudence that the traditional theatre we cherish here the rest of the world has rendered obsolete—or obsolescent, depending on which side of the Atlantic you are. Certainly, as in the other fields of human endeavor, the theatre has grown up, has grown beyond the pale of Betterton and Talma and Macready to move into the province we call *modern* (as if we were naming a disease)—the composite achievement of Craig, Appia, Stanislavsky, Reinhardt, Jessner, Meierhold.

To be modern is obviously not to deny that a strong bond holds theatre to drama, but merely to re-define that bond. The gentleman's agreement among the playwright, the stage artist and the playgoer continues to hold them in an eternal triangle, but the *modern* playgoer no longer goes to the theatre to be recited to.

The availability of the printed book is perhaps the greatest single factor which has deepened the distinction between dramatic literature and the theatre arts. Before the big boom in the publishing business, interested parties were compelled to attend performances to get wind of the playwright. Elizabeth and James might never have known *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* without the benefit of command performances, but certainly the modern Elizabeth can have her Fry or her Osborne in the solitude of her study.

It seems rather foolish for the playgoer now to pay the high rates on Broadway or the West End just to watch his own prejudices on parade, prejudices he got directly from the book for which he has already paid a considerable sum. The extravagance of playgoing might be worth it only if he could get something other than what he came with—the shock of seeing that the play he knew so well has suddenly become another, though it has remained the same.

I wonder if Hamlet might not have been saying precisely this when he spoke of plays catching the consciences of kings—the play between the viewer's knowledge and his ignorance, between his expectations and the frustration of these expectations which itself he might have expected. The literary experience grows resplendent in the reader by a process of slow accumulation, constant reflection and retrospection; in the theatre, the viewer is illuminated by violent stabs of surprise, like bolts of lightning.

The meaning of the production is the meaning of the play, yes. If the statement needs qualification, it is because we generally think of the meaning of drama as if it were a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow for which the text provides a chart saying "X marks the spot." The meaning of the play is everywhere in the play, in much the same way that the flavor of the pudding is caught up in its crust. The connoisseur of pastries does not run to the confectioner for the recipe to find out how the confection *ought* to taste; it *tastes* the way it tastes, and you take a bite and chew on it to find out how it tastes.

I am not sure how valid these analogies are, but I think they underscore the fact that while the meaning of the play is one and unique, the playwright is not necessarily aware of all of it; at least, not if the play is a classic, and a classic precisely because it is rich with levels of meaning and it speaks, like Babel, in many tongues. Genius is precisely that which produces something bigger than itself. As James Bridie once said, "I am the last person you should ask about the play. I am only the author. I have written an armature, inside which possibly are the deepest ideas which have never quite formulated themselves in my conscience. If, as I hope and believe, I am a poet, there will be something in these, but I am the last person to know what it is."

I have known directors at work whose energies are spent towards the realization of "what the playwright means." If they happen to be working on the play of a living author, they quickly summon him for a disquisition on his theme. If the playwright happens to be abroad or dead, that's really

bad because then the problem of interpretation becomes a game at the ouija board.

In some such situation, Chekhov once snapped, "I wrote it down; it is all there. Why don't you read my play?"

When a producer is dealing with a careless writer like Shakespeare, any attempt to implicate the playwright's intention is likely to prove embarrassing and altogether futile. If one considers further that the texts have come down to us not without wear and tear, that they are merely reconstructions essayed by scholars and historians, still in a state of flux until heaven knows when, one sees that Shakespeare's plays are not Shakespeare's the way, let us say, Eliot's plays are Eliot's. One can imagine Shakespeare's head spinning as wildly as ours on first looking into a Variorum edition of *Hamlet*. Finally, if we who love Shakespeare dearly claim that he is the first genius of the English theatre, the poet of all days, the dramatist par excellence of all humanity, etc., etc., perhaps we do him little homage by insisting that the meaning of *Hamlet* or *Othello* or *Julius Caesar* is all that he intended. It is, I think, in Shakespearean drama, more than in the works of other masters, that the deepest ideas never quite formulated themselves in the playwright's conscience. Shakespeare was, after all, not a man of letters. He was a showman in the tradition of the Andreinis, Ziegfeld and Hitchcock. The paradox of his genius consists in this fact—that he could set out to be mediocre and succeed only in being profound. He harnessed his powers to produce the impact of the moment, to face up to the moment's problems of casting and scene rotation, not to say politicking. What could he care about the infinite reverberation of his metaphors?

The intentional fallacy to which the sophisticated reader is most sensitive is often glossed over when the reader goes to the theatre. The literary critic analyzing the poem has no difficulty in regarding it as if it were a globed fruit severed from the tree. But the same critic employing his powers in the theatre is likely to mistake the play for the playwright, ever swearing on the bugaboo of "what the author meant."

Tradition is the most vigilant warden of the author's meaning, and it is most self-conscious of its police work in the theatre where the object of worship is often two-in-one: the great creator and the great performer. One can hardly think of Fokine's *Dying Swan* without thinking of Pavlova; or of Lady Macbeth without Mrs. Siddons. To this date, the Prince in Rostand's *The Eaglet* is still played by actresses for no reason, I am sure, except that the role was created by "the divine Sarah."

I think that idolatry is inevitable in the theatre. The painting and the poem, no matter how old and hallowed they are, reside with us. We look at them without falling all over ourselves because they keep, and we know we have world enough and time to consider them and re-consider them and ever to reverse our last considerations. Since they have passed the scrutiny of past ages and we see how various the judgments have been, even in our most vehement pronouncements about them we can feel tentative and self-ironical. Because the literary interpreters—Aristotle and Dryden and Johnson included—live in their writings, we are able to admire them without reverence; we might even confute them if we have the stomach, and we do not feel that we have blasphemed the gods.

But great performances are absolutely dead. We can remember only the externals, thanks to reviewers and biographers and spinsters at their diaries; we cannot examine, and therefore argue with, the heart and soul that produced so much magical power. In a desperate attempt to retrieve what is lost, Tradition makes amulets of those gestures—that by these dead relics the spirit world might be summoned to electrify our lives again. It should not be surprising that the theatre, which was the world's first church, should also be the last bastion of superstition.

If the great performer is never traditional, it is because he does not believe in formulas. He understands that Salvini is Salvini and Gassman is Gassman and, more important still, that Salvini's Italians share with Gassman's only a country and a name.

History does not repeat itself, at least not in the theatre. The theatre is the one place, Antonine Artaud says, where a gesture once made, cannot be made again. To be traditional in the fanatical sense is really to ask the living to think and feel as if they were dead.

On the other hand, the great performer is always traditional; meaning to say, he has roots. But he bursts out of the sub-soil which is the source of his richness. He produces the new, as Eliot points out in a famous essay, because he has *assimilated* the old. Traditionalism, if it must be efficacious, cannot be worn like a costume at the Mardi Gras; it must graft itself to the living body and allow itself to be transformed utterly, beyond recognition, though it is truly there, as electric charges in the water.

At this point, I wish to make my peace with the scholar, the critic, the professor and the lecturer, and all the good angels of the academic circle who stand guard at the threshold of a classic with flaming sword, crying "Detour" to the vandal and lopping off the head of a trespasser with Olympian detachment.

It is necessary to keep in mind that a great play has a split personality, as it were. As literature, it belongs with its author who belongs with his age, and as such it is a document as historical in character and as fixed in implication as Magna Charta or the Treaties of Versailles. On the other hand, as theatre piece, it belongs with its audience, who belong with their own time-delimited obsessions and idiosyncracies. As theater piece, it is chameleon-like, changing colors to blend with every new environment. The play must modify its meaning in order to remain meaningful.

The vaunted universality of great art does not minimize the problem of traffic between playwright and spectator. Perhaps the problem is compounded in this case. Great art is always hopelessly bound up with history; it is the mirror of its epoch and is most local where it is most universal. If scholars and critics cannot make an end of expatiating on the masterworks—and, in fact, are able to make a living out of scholarship and criticism—it is surely because the masterworks say

the important things they say in a language that does not communicate all at once. The scholar and the critic are interpreters in the most obvious sense of the word. They look at the classic from the point of view of the age that produced it.

On the other hand, the theatre looks at the classic from the point of view of the age that receives it. Because in the theatre the play must communicate all at once, it is forced to undergo a process of simplification, even distortion. It would be ludicrous to demand scholarly credentials of playgoers at the box-office; if anything, perhaps we should ask the scholarly playgoer to kindly leave his scholarship behind. In this respect, the theatre is more of an arena or a church than a public library or museum. It purges the play of historicity even as it takes pains to create an atmosphere of authenticity. It disentangles the local from the foreign, the timely from the ancient time, though it might—the paradox of esthetic distance consists in this—pretend to you that *this* can happen only to *these* people, so relax and have fun; be pitiful and terrified without fear of social embarrassment. The stage interpretation of a classic is in essence a work of adaptation.

If the scholar and the critic look at the play one way, and the theatre artist another, it is but logical that the directions they take should bring them to separate ends. It is obvious too that the work of one does not challenge the work of the other. Certainly, there is no reason why they should cancel each other out.

What then is the meaning of the mounted play? If the stage does not profess to hold the mirror up to: (a) the playwright's intention, which is a big X, be he alive or be he dead; (b) the critical interpretation (Whose? Critics are the most mutually disagreeable folks this side of the proscenium.); or, (c) the tradition of canonized performances, to repeat which is, in effect, to parody them—what does the producer produce?

Look at the terms producer, director, *metteur en scène*, *régisseur*, and so on. Although they take on varying shades of meaning at various times and places, they have a common denominator; they distinguish our man from the stage manager

whom he has displaced since May 1, 1874, when Duke George II of Saxe-Meiningen unveiled his theretofore unknown troupe at a theatre in Berlin, exemplifying from there on, as Lee Simonson points out, "the necessity for a commanding director who could visualize an entire performance and give it unity as an interpretation by complete control of every moment of it; the interpretive value of the smallest details of lighting, costuming, make-up, stage setting; the immense discipline and the degree of organization needed before the performance was capable of expressing 'the soul of a play.'"

I hazard to underscore what all this means, something which only a few theatre commentators would concede—that the art of play production is as absolute a phase of artistic creation as the art of dramatic composition.

It is one thing, no doubt, to create characters and scenes out of ideas and words, and quite another to create them with people, fabrics, wood beams and light beams, but the difference lies, I think, in the materials used rather than in the powers put to use. I suggest, in fact, that the playwright precedes the producer only in time; their efforts are absolute within their respective spheres. To say that theatre exists for the sake of drama is as gratuitous as to say that drama exists for the sake of theatre. Even there, a sober appraisal of the careers of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Molière, Shakespeare, Chekhov, the German expressionists, Brecht, and, surely, most of the contemporary commercial or non-commercial playwrights would suggest that, in many cases, it is the staging that circumscribes the play, rather than the other way round.

Stark Young explains the relationship between the producer and the play by analogy to the painter and the landscape. The landscape is a complete unit of experience available to all but the blind; the painting of the landscape is an entirely different matter for an entirely different kind of viewer. The landscape is composed of trees and hills and clouds; the painting is composed with cloth and oils. Needless to say, the landscape did not paint itself; moreover, it has undergone a total transformation in the process of being painted. The landscape and the picture might seem to evoke the same feel-

ing in the viewer, but actually, the feelings cannot be the same because Nature and the painter work in two entirely different ways.

The mere act of transplanting drama from the printed page to the physical stage will make inevitable a total transformation. The producer, like the painter, can express what he wishes to express only in terms of his means of expression which, themselves, modify what he wishes to express.

I hope I may be allowed to over-simplify the producer's creative process as follows: Here is the play, a work of literature controlled by the milieu that produced it, attended by a retinue of meanings which, as Wellek claims, accumulate, interact and, finally, add up in the mind of the literary world. Thus, the producer begins his work as a scholar, looking at the play in terms of its epoch, investigating its multiple backgrounds—the genetic, the historical, the social, the political, the religious, the philosophical. Invariably, he will be led towards a survey of critical appraisals of the work, both past and present. Similarly, he investigates the history of the play in the theatre, studying each production also in the light of its backgrounds. The producer, quite often accused of illiteracy, is perhaps more often erudite, though rarely pedantic.

Now the producer must look at his materials: the players, the stage and its equipment, certainly the budget, which would inexorably determine what sets, what costumes, what accessories are going to be at his disposal. He assesses his players to find out their depth and breadth and height. Costumes, sets and accessories will come as the budget allows them to come. Perhaps, somewhere in his mind, the producer tabulates the assets and liabilities of the specific materials he must work with. He must be practical.

Finally, the producer looks at his audience, that leviathan of sentiments and opinions one cannot really know. In the last analysis, he must rely on an acute perceptiveness that would enable him to see his contemporaries in their elemental selves, beyond the pale disguises of sophistication and civilities. The producer must get at the closet where his audience hides

its skeletons, for his role is contrarious, that of tormentor and nurse.

The uniqueness of the meaning of a production owes itself to the interplay of so many determinants shaping the producer's vision of the play. If the work has organic unity, it will necessarily seem different from the play which is still at its center, but from which it has radiated, the way a pearl radiates from the particle that has intruded upon the oyster.