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"Carmen" in Tagalog

CARMITA LEGARDA CARRION

Bizet's four-act opera *Carmen* has just completed five performances in Manila to full-house and standing-room audiences at the F.E.U. auditorium. At the Sunday matinee performance on September 2, many were heard remarking that this was the first time in the history of the opera in our country that people were buying tickets for seats in spaces ordinarily meant only for passage aisles. This was the first time that, with a typhoon signal up, the rain pouring down and the sidewalks and streets flooded ankle-deep, people kept coming in droves to watch an opera.

The opera *Carmen* is natural drawing card. In the Philippines even the barrio people are familiar with one or two tunes from *Carmen* because town bands frequently play pieces from the opera for fiestas and gatherings. But there were two outstanding things about this production of *Carmen*: one was the Tagalog libretto; the other was the transfer of locale from 19th century Spain to 19th century Philippines.

The idea of a *Carmen* in Tagalog was first proposed by Dr. Herbert Zipper in 1951 to the officers of the Manila Symphony Society and the Asociación Musical de Filipinas. It was thought then that it would make excellent material for presentation at the much-anticipated but (until now) not-as-yet realized National Theater. This year, in celebration of the Silver Anniversary (25 years) of the Manila Symphony Society

and the Pearl Anniversary (30 years) of the Manila Symphony Orchestra, it was decided to go ahead with the Tagalog *Carmen*.

There was the big problem of the Tagalog libretto, however. Who would make the translation?

This was not as easy as it might seem to the casual observer. There are not many writers in Tagalog today who are also so steeped in music and musical rhythm as to produce a Tagalog translation that would readily adapt itself to the music and the spirit of such a well-known opera. The Manila Symphony Society was fortunate in obtaining the services of such Tagalog writers as Manuel Car. Santiago (courtesy of Ramon Roces Publications) and Vicente Liwag (courtesy of San Miguel Brewery). Valuable assistance was given them in the execution of the Tagalog libretto by Mr. and Mrs. Zulueta da Costa, Clara Albert, Don David, Basilisa Gerónimo, Purita Ponce Enrile and Pedrito Reyes.

The critics were unanimous in their praise of the Tagalog libretto. Said Mr. Mabini Centeno of the *Evening News*: "The Tagalog translation was expertly executed. The simplicity of its wordings was the mark of its excellence." Said Mrs. Josefina Quiambao of the *Daily Mirror*: "Carmen in Tagalog sounded like the Filipino melodies with their rich qualities of sweetness, lightness and beauty. . . . almost everybody felt 'at home' in the language." Well-known Tagalistas Teodoro Agoncillo and Lumen Aspillera found the translation "fluid and fluent." Bessie Hackett of the *Bulletin* noted that "the Tagalog words rolled smoothly and musically from the lips of the singers," and congratulated the translators "who did a Herculean task well." Benjamin Tupas in the *Manila Times* added: "The translation into the vernacular proved surprisingly apt: vocal lines remained in shape from the contours of the language. Manila opera lovers probably for the first time followed intimately the relationship between text and music, the very thing that shaped the course of the work in the composer's mind. Messrs. Manuel Car. Santiago and Vicente Liwag are to be highly commended as well as the others who helped in one way or another in the translation."

The British Ambassador, Mr. George Clutton, was overheard saying to Mrs. Trinidad F. Legarda, President of the Manila Symphony Society: “Now you’ve spoiled *Carmen* for me. I won’t be able to enjoy it again unless it’s in Tagalog!”

Rehearsals for the opera were in full swing even while the translation was still being polished. The chorus of street urchins which merited so much applause during each of the four performances had been practising since May under Mrs. Stella Goldenberg Brimo. These young boys who, according to one critic, seemed to enjoy their singing as much as the audience did, came from Araullo Public School.

In casting the role of Carmen there was difficulty finding a real mezzosoprano. After almost interminable auditions Conching Rosal, a young soprano student under Prof. Lourdes C. Razón at the University of Santo Tomas Conservatory of Music, was given the part. Miss Rosal worked very hard at the role. She gave up all her subjects of study at the Conservatory and all plans of a graduation in July of this year and devoted all her time to the preparation of *Carmen*. The result was, indeed, a most convincing Carmen. Many first-nighters talked of her as “a revelation,” “a brilliant discovery.” Reviewers said in part: “The coquettish role of Carmen was excellently played by Conching Rosal who not only was an able singer but also an able actress.” And again, “Conching Rosal was a revelation in the role of Carmen. Her voice and acting ability stood creditably well through the four acts of the opera.” For those who wondered why a mezzo was not chosen for the role of Carmen, Mr. Tupas pointed out in his review the fact that the first productions at the Paris Opera-Comique had a soprano singing the title role. There were some who found Miss Rosal’s interpretation of Carmen too fiery and too coquettish for a Filipina in the 19th century. And then there were others who found her not fiery and coquettish enough. These contradictory opinions, as a matter of fact, were expressed by two different columnists writing for the same paper on the same day. Be that as it may, the over-

all consensus of opinion was that Conching Rosal was a most believable Carmen, and a "natural" for the part.

Similar praise was bestowed on Mrs. Salvación Oppus Yñiguez as Micaela, "whose rendition of Micaela's aria in the third act was, in the opinion of many, the best individual bit of singing in the opera." Don David as Don José and Philip John Santos as Escamillo, the toreador, were likewise highly praised for their fine renditions and sensitive portrayals. The supporting cast, Irma Ponce Enrile-Potenciano as Frasquita, Nenita Villanueva as Mercedes, Julio Gonzalez Anguita as Zuñiga, Vicente Antiporda as Dancairo, Jimmy Melendrez as Remendado, and Reynaldo Payawal as Morales, performed their roles creditably and elicited much favorable comment. This is a good sign—for the smaller roles in any production hold the balance toward its complete success or failure.

Rosalinda Orosa of the *Chronicle* commented that "intelligent casting" was obvious. The casting was only one of the myriad responsibilities on the shoulders of the two people who were most directly responsible for the over-all success of the Tagalog *Carmen*. They are Dr. Herbert Zipper, conductor of the Manila Symphony Orchestra, and his wife, Trudl Dubskey-Zipper, stage director. Indefatigable and hard-working, they pooled together all their resources and came out with the production of an opera that has been called the "crowning achievement" of their careers.

A typical example of this couple's resourcefulness is well illustrated by their answer to the question of how to substitute the harp (not available for lack of a professional harpist in Manila, and the lack of room in the orchestra pit of the F.E.U. Auditorium even if there were one) with an instrument other than a piano (which is also too bulky for the small and narrow orchestra pit of the F.E.U. Auditorium). Many portions of the opera require the harp for total musical effect. Six weeks before the first performance, Dr. Zipper hit on the idea of using a guitar electrically amplified, an idea which brought about very happy results as the guitar produced the sounds of the harp faithfully and most beautifully.

The Manila Symphony Orchestra went through a "grinder" (as one orchestra member put it) until each one was ready to give his finest. The volunteer Manila Symphony Chorus went through similar training. The most exceptional thing about Dr. and Mrs. Zipper is that they participated in the production at all levels—from the highest realms of artistic endeavor such as staging and musical creation to the more mundane but necessary chores such as buying textiles for costumes at the Central Market.

Staging, costumes and acting were handled almost solely by Mrs. Zipper, whose touch was evident in most of the soloists' character interpretations. At the F.E.U. auditorium, staging always presents a problem because the stage is so inadequate and small. But rather than sacrifice the number of voices that could be accommodated on the stage, Mrs. Zipper worked out intricate entrances, exits and movements so balanced and natural that the scenic atmosphere was enhanced rather than diminished.

The costumes were adapted from authentic paintings and pictures of 19th century Manila by Mrs. Zipper who sketched and designed all the costumes. The research involved in the final choice of costumes was a large undertaking. Most of the reviewers as well as opera-goers had only the highest praise for the colors and color combinations used, and for the dramatic lighting effects.

Scenery designed by Ernest Korneld brought forth immediate and spontaneous applause from appreciative audiences and drew unaccustomed praise from most of the press reviewers. Said one: "The settings were beautifully and authentically conceived. The sets used easily stand out as some of the best that have been used in any stage presentation hereabouts." Mr. Korneld, incidentally, is the 3rd Vice-President of the Manila Symphony Society and, as in past years, graciously donated the scenic designs for *Carmen* which were then executed so ably by Juan Solomon.

Behind the scenes there were many people who deserve credit for their contributions to the success of *Carmen*. For

three months Miss Basilisa Gerónimo devoted most of her time, her talent and her energy to *Carmen* in her capacity as director of musical preparation. In the research work for authenticity Mr. Benito Legarda Jr. and Mr. Fernando Zóbel de Ayala are worthy of mention. They uncovered evidence¹ to show that bullfighting did exist in 19th century Manila, a sport which many people doubted as having existed then. Since the opera calls for smugglers, even the question of what goods could have been smuggled into the Philippines at that time was delved into meticulously.

More important, in shifting the scene of the opera from 19th century Spain to 19th century Philippines, great care was taken that the translated setting possessed all the essential features of the original. Thus, in Act I, the unidentified public square in Seville with a cigarette factory on one side and a bridge leading out of the square on the other side is transferred to Plaza Binondo where the La Insular Cigarette factory stood on one side until 1944 and where the bridge over the Estero de Binondo leads out on the other. In Act II the tavern of Lillas Pastia, a smugglers' meeting-place outside Seville, is transferred to a tavern in Santa Ana, then a suburb of Manila. For the smugglers' hide-out in the mountains in Act III, the Philippine locale is the vicinity of Tagaytay Ridge which for the smugglers would have been the ideal place since it is sufficiently near Manila Bay and is at the same time perfect for concealment. In Act IV the original setting is an open space beside a bull ring in Seville. In the Philippine locale the bull ring is located somewhere in the Ermita district with part of Intramuros showing in the background. The historical basis for this is that the Calero bull ring of 1885 was located at Gonzales and San Marcelino streets in the Ermita, just across the Paco border and very close to the Paco cemetery.

The vast amount of work involved in this production of *Carmen* in Tagalog seems to have been amply justified and even rewarded by the interest and praise showered upon it

¹ W.E. Retana, *Fiesta de Toros en Filipinas* (Madrid 1896). (One of the earliest bullfights in the Philippines occurred in 1619. See Father de la Costa's article "A Marian Festival in Manila, 1619" PHILIPPINE STUDIES II, 1954, pp. 317 ff.—EDITOR)

by audience and critics. Not only Filipinos but many groups of foreigners as well went to see *Carmen* in Tagalog twice. Of no small consequence is the fact that the atmosphere of *Carmen* and the events that take place in the opera are things which local audiences can identify themselves with. From the point of view of mechanical detail, the whole Spanish background of the opera enabled a transfer of locale to the Philippines without requiring any change whatsoever in the name of a single character in the opera. One critic pointed out that "Carmen, a Bizet masterpiece, seemed to have been specially written for this country. The plot could easily pass as something Filipino and the Spanish-inspired melodies were so reminiscent of the old Spanish era. Use of typical costumes and authentic 'guardia civil' outfits lent more local color to the opera."

At this point we might well ask: did *Carmen* establish Tagalog as an adequate vehicle for opera? The answer would seem to be a resounding YES. There is no question that "Philippine opera has taken a bold step forward" with this presentation of *Carmen* in Tagalog. As an experiment it proved a wonderful success. Even those who were inclined to be skeptical at the beginning were surprised that they enjoyed the opera so thoroughly in Tagalog. Some reviewers hold the success of *Carmen* as being "a good portent for future artistic endeavors."²

² The critics cited in the above article are the following: Mabini R. Centeno (*Evening News* 30 August), Josefina Quiambao (*The Daily Mirror* 30 August), Rosalinda Orosa (*Manila Chronicle* 31 August), Bessie Hackett (*Manila Daily Bulletin* 31 August), Benjamin Tupas (*Manila Times* 31 August), Carmen Guerrero Nakpil (*Manila Chronicle* 31 August), Lydia D. Castillo (*Philippines Herald* 31 August).