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The Filipino Drama (1905)

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THE FILIPINO DRAMA [1905]. By Arthur Stanley Riggs. Manila: Ministry of Human Settlements, Intramuros Administration, 1981. 666 pages.

In 1965 Central Bank Governor Jaime C. Laya, then a graduate student in the United States, visited a used-book store in Washington, D.C., where he bought an old manuscript by Arthur Stanley Riggs entitled "The Filipino Drama." Despite the manuscript's comprehensive title, Riggs' interest in Philippine drama was limited to the anti-American works presented by Filipino author-patriots of the 1899-1904 period. In his manuscript Riggs discussed earlier Philippine dramatic forms only to use them as reference points for his analysis of the "seditious" plays of his era. Believing the manuscript to be of little value, Laya ignored it until he later learned of the true worth of his chance find. Only now, 76 years after it was first written, is the Riggs book finally available to the general public.

The actual book as published by the Intramuros Administration is composed of three distinct sections; a short introduction, the original Riggs manuscript and a lengthy appendix where the six plays included in Riggs' text are presented in either their original Tagalog or in retranslations from English and Spanish versions. Doreen Fernandez, who helped see the manuscript to print, contributed the brief but comprehensive introduction that gives the reader the proper context needed to understand the importance of the "seditious" drama. In her introduction Fernandez presents and analyzes important background information on the history of the times, on the playwrights and their plays, on the reaction of the American government and on Riggs' Philippine experience.

In preparing his manuscript Riggs read all of the available Spanish literature on Filipino drama, numerous newspaper accounts of the controversial play presentations and voluminous legal briefs prepared for the sedition trials of the arrested playwrights. He also spoke with American and Filipino officials of the colonial government and even saw some of the plays himself. Because of this thorough preparation Riggs authoritatively describes such dissimilar topics as the gradual development of Manila's theatre districts during the Spanish regime, the physical unpleasantness of going to see a play in a local theatre and the slow realization by the American regime of the existence and importance of the "seditious" plays. Riggs also adds colorful details about how the plays were actually staged, especially when the productions varied from the formal scripts.

In his text Riggs includes the complete scripts of six plays as examples of specific types of patriotic and or anti-American drama. Although the plays are given in English for Riggs' intended American readership, the inclusion of two of them, *Luhang Tagalog* and *Hindi Ako Patay*, is of singular importance for Philippine literature. After the suppression of these two plays the scripts

were either lost or destroyed, but now Bonifacio P. Ilagan was able to re-translate the English versions back to an approximation of their original Tagalog for inclusion in the appendix. In addition, Riggs discusses five other plays that were presented in Manila and in various provinces and for which there is no other remaining record.

Although Riggs was very thorough in his research, the reader would be well advised not to accept all of the author's interpretations. For example, Riggs' classification schema for Philippine drama is rigidly simplistic and confuses more than it clarifies. Riggs also cannot seem to make up his mind about whether Aurelio Tolentino wrote the plays ascribed to him or not. In his introduction to *Luhang Tagalog* Riggs claims that Tolentino did not have the ability to author such a sophisticated work. Yet, later he confirms Tolentino's authorship of *Kahapon*, *Ngayon at Bukas* and claims that this play was the second part of a Tolentino projected trilogy of which *Luhang Tagalog* was the first installment. As well, Riggs states that the Filipino theatre-goer was bored with the third act of *Kahapon*, *Ngayon at Bukas* but then cites a *Manila Cableness* story which indicates quite the opposite.

An unintended contribution of the Riggs manuscript is the insight it gives into the mentality of the colonizing Americans. Riggs and his American contemporaries had strong nineteenth century Anglo-Saxon supremacy notions and these prejudices litter Riggs' analysis. At one point Riggs says that no genuine native literature was created under Spain's cultural domination because of the native's "naturally puerile intellectual stamina" (p. 26). Later, Riggs characterizes the Filipino as:

"... half-civilized, [they] carry their ancient spirit of savage barbarity in even the present and let it burn hotly through the thin, the perilously thin, veneer of quasi-civilization, frequent and drastic coats of which have been slapped on freely with a flowing brush by Europe and America, but apparently without touching the core of the people's heart." (p. 278)

The innermost thoughts of colonial officials like Brigadier-General Henry T. Allen of the Constabulary, Dr. Albert E. Jenks, the chief of the government's Ethnological Survey, and others are not often revealed frankly. Almost all official documents and statements are phrased in the careful language of formal government bureaucracy and by the diplomatic need of pacifying the "hearts and minds" of the new colonial subjects. Usually it is only by finding rarely documented off-hand remarks or by discovering a few unguarded passages of personal letters located in obscure archives that anyone can learn what colonial officials really thought about their subjects. Riggs makes the process of learning about the mentality of colonial officials easy by freely quoting them and by discussing the gist of what they told him personally.

The reader discovers that Jenks' ideas were not different from Riggs' and that Constabulary officers were obsessed with placing the blame for the "seditious" plays on their arch-nemesis Dominador Gomez. Colonial officials suspected Gomez to be a prominent member of what Riggs calls the "inner circle" of the "political ring" of the Katipunan society of bandits and cut-throats. (pp. 56-61, 225-27, 279-83 et passim). In fact, it was these and many other indiscretions that prompted some people to advise Riggs against continuing his work on his manuscript (p. 45). In any case, the turn-of-the century Western attitudes present in the Riggs manuscript are today both amusing and infuriating, but it is necessary for the modern reader to pay close attention to the Riggs book in order to appreciate the psychological dimension of the colonial experience.

The Tagalog versions of the "seditious" plays analyzed in the Riggs manuscript and found in the appendix may be the most worthwhile part of the present book. Not only have some lost plays been rediscovered and retranslated but all of the most important plays of the era are now readily available in a useable form. Already *Hindi Ako Patay* has been staged before appreciative audiences in Manila and future productions of the other plays may be expected to follow. It is regrettable, however, that the translator, Bonifacio Ilagan, was not prevailed upon to comment on the present Tagalog versions of the plays. The accuracy of the translations is a real question because almost all of the plays were first translated into Spanish and then into English and now back to Tagalog. Furthermore, Riggs notes that the original translations were often done by Filipinos who, he suspects, toned down the real meanings of many of the words out of a sense of shame to their American employers. Does Ilagan agree with Riggs' suspicion? What were the difficulties Ilagan encountered in translating the plays, and how accurate are the latest translations and those drawn from previously published sources? It is disappointing not to hear from Ilagan on these and other linguistic questions.

Though flawed in interpretation and prejudiced in attitude the Riggs manuscript is nonetheless an important book especially when supplemented by the Fernandez introduction and the appendix of translated plays. *The Filipino Drama* is must reading for anyone interested in Philippine theatre and literature, in the Philippine Revolution and in the first years of the American colonial regime. Governor Laya is to be congratulated on his chance discovery and thanked for sharing the Riggs book with us all. How ironic, and yet fitting, it is that a manuscript such as this should finally be published through the efforts of an official of an independent Philippine government.

Paul A. Rodell