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Nick Joaquin's "Portrait"

II. Distinguished And Filipino

Gloria A. Castro

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cisco Trinidad was splendid as the Senator. This part, we hear, is stolen from a real character in real life. Candida and Paula upbraid the poor Senator mercilessly, throwing into his teeth his crime of abandoning poetry for pesos; but as Trinidad plays the role the Senator seems understandable, genuine, attractive.

Sarah Joaquin was the wicked old witch and Nick Agudo the big bad brother. The pace picked up when Alfred Burgos and Oscar Keese stepped on the stage. These four are intelligent actors, competent craftsmen, who are humble enough to play small parts. In any production the bit-players invest as much time and as much energy as the stars and they make or break the play. As long as the Barangay has actors like Burgos and Keese, like Sarah Joaquin and Nick Agudo, it will command respect, with or without success in the box office.

The production is so good that when the play is over your mind is filled with the thesis: "*Hold on to the past.*" And the thesis is true: our roots are in the past, like the roots of a tree, and we should not cut them off. But a tree also lives on sunlight and rain—this morning's sunlight and the rain that is falling now. If we lived only on our heritage, we would not grow. Our roots are in the culture of Spain but America has been with us for half a century and our modern Christian Filipino culture is all around us like the sunlight and the rain. We should love the past, it is true. But we should also love the present and the future. All our glory is not behind us; we still have today and tomorrow.

JAMES B. REUTER

II. Distinguished And Filipino

It is perhaps safe to assume that no other contemporary Filipino dramatist has yet produced a piece that has the depth and eloquence of Mr. Joaquin's *Portrait*.

In all good drama there is conflict. In this piece, the conflict lies in the two cultures that present-day Filipinos are heir to: the Spanish with its idealism and its faith; and the newer, western ways, which to the author signify materialism and progress,

but progress in a deprecating sense. To him the "custom and ceremony" that Spain brought with her to the Islands are everything that is beautiful and good in our culture, and that has died and given way to our present modern culture with its cynicism and superficiality.

The play centers on the spinsters, Candida and Paula Marasigan: two old women who live in an old house in the old Manila Intramuros. They were brought up in the ways and customs of the past with its *tertulias* and *bailes* but it is their misfortune to see those days of old giving way to modern living where money and material success seem to be all that matters. The struggle lies within themselves—whether they should continue to cling to the ideals of the past and live in poverty and humiliation, or allow themselves to be swallowed up by "the modern jungle" and live in ease and luxury.

This struggle is what makes the play. And all throughout, it is evident that Mr. Joaquin laments the passing away of such an age, "an Age of lamplight and gaslight, of harps and whiskers and fine carriages; an Age of manners and melodrama, of Religion and Revolution." He is contemptuous of the modern world, "hurrying gaily towards destruction." And he adds that the newer generation has so separated itself from the Faith and the ideals of the past that there is hardly any vestige of these left in the present. This is the Portrait symbolized by the painting that dominates the play: Aeneas carrying Anchises on his back and behind them the burning city of Troy. But, unlike the Vergilian classic, the portrait depicts the old generation saving itself from destruction since the younger generation is unable to save it.

The play is dominated by this theme. It is the play of our elders, and we find them at play's end clinging to the past "contra mundum." They are the personification of beauty, cleanliness and grace. It is the young who personify materialism, cynicism, indifference and vulgarity. It is the young, therefore—modern youth inculcated with modern ideals—who are hurrying the world to its destruction, leaving behind without any qualms of conscience the innocence and beauty of the past.

There is no doubt that there is truth in Mr. Joaquin's thesis. But it raises questions. Is it entirely true? Has the new generation in abandoning the past (if it has really done so) abandoned thereby its Faith and spiritual ideals? Is our modern world all

materialism and superficiality, and are our young so vulgar and cynical as Joaquin depicts them? Is there nothing good or beautiful that has come out of accepting modern ways—more specifically, American ways? The younger generation, it seems, chooses to live in a world of reality, but is this only a pseudo-awareness, as Joaquin leads us to believe? In his play the older generation lives in a world of ideals, and it is on the passing away of such a world that Mr. Joaquin has written this elegy. Does this imply that the younger generation has no such ideals or, if it has, is unable to live up to them? This is something to ponder over.

Nick Joaquin's ability as a writer has already been extolled by many and to say here that his play is beautifully written would be adding but little to what has already been said about him. In this play he has managed to present a variety of characters, Filipinos from all walks of life, with varying emotions and sensibilities: the poor and the rich, the old and the young, the poet turned politician, the artist and the bit performer, the idealist and the materialist, the dreamer and the realist—all of them dominated and confused by the speed with which our culture shifted from the European to the American, from the old to the new.

There is imagination and color, depth and intensity in the play, but it seems that much of this was lost in its adaptation for the stage. Some of the very interesting characters, the touching scenes and stirring soliloquies which serve as a means of understanding the author's thesis were unfortunately cut to fit the requirements of a dramatic presentation. This leads one to wonder whether Mr. Joaquin wrote the play for actual production or merely because he felt it his "vocation" to "remember and sing" and grieve for the passing of the old Manila and its way of life because in so doing "something of it is left; something of it survives, and will survive, as long as I live and remember—I who have known and loved and cherished these things!"

It is indeed a distinguished play, a truly Filipino play. It is time that our Filipino dramatists set to work producing more such plays for our stage.

GLORIA A. CASTRO

III. The Invisible Protagonists

It is possible to say that in Nick Joaquin's *Portrait*, the chief protagonists never appear on the stage.