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Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco

Entablado: Theaters and Performances in the Philippines

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their benefit a moral vocabulary shared by their patrons. Indeed, it is this intersubjective affective landscape that appears to enable its choreographed coherence and performativity by differently positioned social actors in the first place. What is suggested is a finely calibrated and knowing local community that is equally “mundane” and sublime. Whether these relations are splintered or further differentiated by other variables like gender, class, sexuality, and political ideology within the local community has been less explored given the specific intent and parameters of the project. As a first step in making the case for the intricacies of tulong as experienced and articulated by Barangay Angeles residents, however, there is much to commend about the book, and it deserves wide reading and debate.

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SIR ANRIL PINEDA TIATCO

Entablado: Theaters and Performances in the Philippines

Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2015. 209 pages.

Entablado: Theaters and Performances in the Philippines gathers six essays on local theaters and performances framed by an introduction to theater and performance studies in the Philippines and a concluding chapter on the future of these fields. Using “the trope of *entablado* [stage] as a central idiom” (18), the book’s “itinerary” takes the reader from the performance space of the theater auditorium to the entablado of a theater festival, the streets, the river, the foyer of the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP), and the gathering of people engaged in an academic debate. It is a lively and critical journey: Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco assesses his chosen sites through the interdisciplinary lens of performance studies, which, consciously or not, is laden with a heavy dose of sociology’s debunking motif. In this motif existing social arrangements are not what they claim to be. Rather, these are social constructions borne out of negotiations and compromises that seek to privilege something or the other.

The first leg of this itinerary, an academic debate, sets the debunking tone. “What is Philippine Drama?” asks Nicanor Tiongson in an influential

essay. Tiongson's answer takes the essentialist nationalist position, one that dismisses foreign influences, embraces only Filipino culture, and moves people to action. Tiatco rebuts this view. He cites the diversity of Philippine theater, the heterogeneity of Philippine cultural identities, and the problem of privileging one kind of Philippine theater over others. While Tiatco appreciates the historical contingencies that shape this brand of scholarship, seeing it as a form of "strategic nationalism" that aims to "achieve certain goals against the hegemony of colonial and imperial forces" (27), he asks whether the paradigm remains relevant in the era of globalization. Shouldn't the paradigm have changed? Can the approach remain nationalistic but still be open to other kinds of theater? Philippine-nesses, not Philippine-ness?

A similar issue gets debunked in the second leg of the book's itinerary, one enacted in the academic halls of the University of the Philippines (UP) at Diliman where a *Komedya Festival* was held in 2008. The festival witnessed a move made by esteemed artists to define the *komedya* as a heritage marker and to install it as national theater. Tiatco again challenges the position. The call to heritage, he says, is more political than historical, an assertion that privileges the stand of influential artists and overlooks the fact that heritage is a "contested sociocultural category" (60). Moreover, despite its variations, the *komedya* stays anchored in the ideological battle between Catholics and Muslims. It is a theater that polarizes rather than affirms religious identities and hoists one as superior to the other. What is needed, Tiatco advocates, is the notion of a nation as home, not as a stable and fixed entity but a site of social engagement, "a community enjoying and respecting difference but at the same time attempting to situate each other on an idea of common ground" (68).

This notion of social engagement animates the third and fourth legs of this itinerary. These essays tackle two religious rituals in Pampanga that the author documents in ethnographic detail. One ritual, locally known as *Apung Iru Libad*, occurs on the river. The other, a Lenten ritual involving the nailing on the cross, happens on the streets. Both are performances that entail the interaction of church officials who insist on official practice and local community members who assert their own. Negotiations and compromises ensued, and these, to Tiatco, led to a sharing of power in a performance of "communal intimacy" (86). No group dominated the conduct of these events. Thus, what appears on the outside as a ritual of communal intimacy is, in fact, mired in contradictions and ambivalence.

And the church tolerates them and plays its part, finding comfort perhaps in the observation of Frank Lynch, SJ, that folk Catholicism makes Filipinos better Catholics.

But what happens when solidarity never comes? The fifth leg of this itinerary takes us to the foyer of the CCP. In June 2009 the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) and the CCP released a list of new National Artist honorees and submitted it to the Office of the President for endorsement. A month later the Office of the President issued a new list, dropping one of the original names and adding four others. It did not offer a reasonable explanation for the change. Infuriated, the artistic community called for a mass protest. Tiatco describes the protest performances at the CCP that followed the Malacañang announcement. In a staged necrological service billed as the “Pagdadalamhati ng Bayan Para sa Gawad Alagad ng Sining” several National Artists took off their prize medallions and, echoing the practice of *drama simbolico*, buried them in a huge box. This box and a logo of the awards were then placed in a funeral car and joined a procession of protestors to the NCCA office in Intramuros. There, after more protest performances, the death of the National Artist Awards was formally announced.

But the protest never grew. The influential artists had hoped that their protest rallies would make Filipinos relive the collective trauma they suffered during the colonial period and under martial law. The strategy did not work. Despite the valiant efforts of the artistic community and the media, the message did not galvanize a large majority. Solidarity with the people was only assumed, never realized.

The allusion to the weak link between theater and society comes as a surprise, considering the availability of works that document community engagement in local theater practices. Further scholarly work is needed, but theater scholarship is scant in academic halls. As the Introduction notes, the few schools that offer theater degrees focus on theater arts rather than theater studies. An exception is the graduate program at the UP, but most of the theses produced by its students are “critical examinations of some cultural spectacles” (6) and stored in office shelves. Tiatco adds that many of the graduates do not pursue research and become theater practitioners instead.

Theater studies is not only wanting of scholars but of new theoretical frameworks other than the essentialist nationalist paradigm and the postcolonial approaches that tend to “extend, if not substitute for,

the nationalist sentiment” (15). The field of performance studies is promising, but the approach, well established in international circles, is not yet institutionalized in the country. *Entablado* belongs to this new strand of Philippine theater research that deploys the interdisciplinary lens of performance studies, and in this deployment Tiatco elects to see performances from the vantage point of cosmopolitanism. It is this approach that ushers us to the sixth and final leg of this itinerary, to the theater of Josefina Estrella of UP.

In 2003 Estrella mounted a devised theater piece, *Recoged Esta Voz*, based on the life and poetry of the Spanish artist Miguel Hernández. A year later she staged another devised work, *Sepharad*, which drew from the novel of another Spanish artist, Antonio Muñoz Molina. Both plays were set in Spain, but Estrella’s staging dislocates audiences from the culture of origin and transports them to other territories where familiar actions take place. This combination of dislocation and relocation produces ambiguity and familiarity and, at the same time, underscores issues like war and injustice that affect our common humanity. Tiatco deftly details the elements of these performances. And the net effect is a cosmopolitan debunking of the essentialist nationalist strand of Philippine theater studies. The devised theater pieces do not privilege a nationalist discourse or cultural tradition. They make no appeal to nationalism but still confront vital global issues. They do not invoke any protest action, preferring to make audiences experience an “ethical encounter” (161), a meeting of mind and heart to induce a cosmopolitan disposition of care and responsibility.

The last chapter, “Afterthoughts,” summarizes the main themes of each chapter, offers some additional thoughts on cosmopolitanism and the theater, and applies these in an assessment of Chris Martinez’s *Welcome to IntelStar*, a monodrama about Filipino call center agents. The play satirizes the call center industry in the Philippines. The solo performer mocks the training process, curses her work in Filipino, mimics the English language, and while doing so explores the country’s colonial and postcolonial ties with the colonizers. In Tiatco’s review the play, despite its limitations, remains a “critical interrogation of the global” (181). To document other instances of how Filipino theater creates spaces to celebrate our similarities and differences with fellow humans in a globalized world: this is the author’s agenda for the future of Philippine theater and performance studies.

Tiatco says that he wishes “to continue the conversation on theater and performance studies in the context of Philippine scholarship” (18). This he does very well. His provocative insights are welcome, refreshing, and deserving of more attention. By putting a dent on the essentialist nationalist framework and offering performance studies and cosmopolitanism as alternatives, *Entablado* gives scholars and practitioners a broader appreciation of the diversity found in Philippine theater and in Filipino performance as a whole. I look forward to his next book, and I hope his subsequent essays go beyond the zones of UP and his home province, Pampanga.

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