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**From Ritual to Realism:  
A Brief Historical Survey of Philippine Theater**  
DOREEN G. FERNANDEZ

INDIGENOUS DRAMA

The first Spaniard who wrote about Philippine drama, Vicente Barrantes, affirmed that all Tagalog theater was definitely derived from Spanish theater, and that there was none of it before Spanish contact.<sup>1</sup> A later, more careful scholar, Wenceslao Retana, noted that Barrantes' proof consisted of arguments rather than of documents, and therefore sifted very carefully through all extant accounts, finally to come to the conclusion that there was no proof that the Tagalogs had any *representación escénica* before 1571, the year of the founding of Manila.<sup>2</sup>

When one remembers that the Spaniards had come from a country that reached its *Siglo de Oro* of drama in the 16th and 17th centuries, and that produced Lope de Vega and Calderon de la Barca at that time, then we realize that the drama they were looking for must have been that which they knew from back home, the scripted, staged, costumed Spanish *comedias* and *autos sacramentales*, and which they were of course unlikely to find among the Filipinos who were chanting epics, performing rituals, and celebrating victories with their own kinds of songs and dances.

If, however, one defines drama as it had been in its beginnings in the Western world, as "action" or "deed" involving mimesis or mimicry, then one realizes that what the Spaniards dismissed as "pagan," and even "obscene," but which, to their credit, they recorded and described, was, unrecognized by them, indigenous Philippine drama.

1. Vicente Barrantes, *El Teatro Tagalo* (Madrid: Tipografía de Manuel Gines Hernandez, 1890).

2. Wenceslao E. Retana, *Noticias Historico-bibliograficas de el Teatro en Filipinas desde sus origenes hasta 1898* (Madrid: Libreria General de Victoriano Suarez, 1909).

## RITUALS

The many rituals that punctuated the daily life of the Filipino — his birth, his assuming of a name, his reaching of manhood or womanhood (marked by circumcision or by menstruation), courtship and marriage, planting and harvest, illness, battle, victory over enemies, the assumption of office of a new chieftain, death — were mostly marked by some mimetic action. In them, the petitioner offered sacrifice symbolic of himself to seek the favor of the hidden powers — the supreme being, *Bathalang Maykapal* to the Tagalogs; the *anitos* and other spiritual forces such as the sun, the moon, *tala* (morning star), or *bahag-hari* (rainbow); even certain powerful creatures, such as the crocodile; and certain trees, rocks, and birds. The high priest or priestess, called *baylan*, *babaylan*, *catalonan*, among other names, was at times mediator and intercessor, and at times the figure of power, and therefore representative of the spirit whose favor was being sought.

Perhaps the very first native ritual recorded and reported to the Western world was that documented by Pigafetta in his *Primer Viaggio Intorno al Mondo*, and seen by Magellan and his men.<sup>3</sup> In it two priestesses brought in offerings of food, made obeisance to the sun, then chanted, danced, and sacrificed a pig. After Pigafetta, various friars — Colin, Plasencia, Chirino, etc.<sup>4</sup> — incorporated in their reports to their religious superiors in Spain detailed reports of rituals for marriage, for going to war, for birth and death, for planting and harvest, for illness and victory — for all the important landmarks in tribal life, all the touchstones of survival as a tribal community. These reports were later reinforced by those of the European travellers who roamed all over the archipelago in the 19th century — Germans, Frenchmen, Englishmen — a fact which proves that some four centuries of Christianization had not erased the Filipinos' belief in the power and meaning of their rituals, some of which survive to this day among the non-Christian and Moslem Filipinos, and even, in Christian transformation, among the Christian Filipinos.

3. Antonio Pigafetta, *First Voyage Around the World* (Manila: Filipiniana Book Guild, 1969).

4. Pedro Chirino, S.J., *Relacion de las Islas Filipinas* (1604), trans. Ramon Echevarria (Manila: Historical Conservation Society, 1969).

## SONGS AND DANCES

In 1663, Francisco Colin, S.J., wrote that the natives had songs "that they retain in their memory and repeat when they go on the sea, sung to the time of their rowing, and in their merry-makings, feasts, and funerals, and even in their work . . . In those songs are recounted the fabulous genealogies and vain deeds of their gods." Dances he witnessed too, "warlike and passionate, but . . . [with] steps and measured changes, and interposed . . . [with] some elevations that really enrapture and surprise."

Songs and dances were quite usually part of ritual and, when outside of ritual, often had mimetic elements of their own. The Jesuit Alzina, writing in 1668, records that the Leyte-Samar Visayans had at least six song types.<sup>5</sup> The *ambahan*, a seven-syllable verse of unrhymed couplets, each expressing a complete statement, was sung by a soloist, with a crowd singing the chorus. The *bikal* was a verbal joust in song with two girls or two boys facing each other across a room and, in satirical dialogue, finding fault with each other for the purpose of arousing laughter. The audience goaded either participant with "great merriment and much applause." In the *balak*, courting was accomplished in metaphors, and done either verbally or by means of instruments — the young man playing the *kudyapi* and the maiden the *korlong* — with the communication perfectly understood. The *siday* was sung by ambulant groups of singers, who were paid for their services and the *parahaya* were dirges sung by women during wakes.

One notes that at least some of these songs involved not just words and music but some form of verbal exchange and mimetic action.

Many dances are quite directly imitative, especially of occupations: wild boar hunting for the Igorots, orange-picking or mudfish-catching for the Tausogs, the finding of a beehive and getting stung by angry bees for the Negritos. Others imitate the movements of animals: fish, ducklings, ricebirds. Still others illustrate native lifeways, as the Maranaw *kapi-malongmalong* shows all the possible ways a malong is worn. And finally those that are part of ritual emphasize — sometimes symbolically or

5. Francisco Ignacio Alzina, "History of the Islands and Indios of the Bisayas" (1668) (Muñoz text, University of Chicago, Philippine Studies Program).

metaphorically — the reason for the ritual, as in war dances and wedding dances.

The dramatized song and the dance-drama are certainly among the earliest forms of Philippine drama.<sup>6</sup>

#### CUSTOMS

Other non-ritualistic or non-ceremonial customs of the early Filipinos would also qualify as drama not only because of mimetic action, but also because in some cases an element of “pretend” has entered the practice or game.

The games played at wakes for the dead are an example. Ancient Filipinos honored their dead who lay in state by singing, feasting, and drinking with the relatives of the deceased during the *lamayan*. In earlier days, in some regions, the body was not interred till all the rice and animals of the deceased had been eaten by the guests.

During this wake, the mourners enlivened the evening, stayed awake, and drove away harmful spirits by holding poetical contests in jest or riddle such as the *duplo*, *bulaklakan*, *karagatan*, *panyo palaran*, *kulasisi sing hari*, etc.

In the *duplo*, for example, one game is called a *kaharian*, and a *hari* or king and his *piskal* are in charge. The king starts the game by tossing an accusation (e.g. “You stole the roses from my garden! ”) at one of the *bilyakos* (male participants) or *bilyakas* (female participants), who then either defends himself — in dodecasyllabic quatrains full of metaphors, allusions, riddles, lines from the metrical romances, etc. — or is defended by someone else, or accuses someone in turn. The game consists of keeping the verse moving and flying, until a player is caught without an acceptable answer. He or she is then pronounced guilty, and punished by being hit on the hand with a *palmatoryo* (a leather slipper), or by being ordered to say a *dalit* or prayer in memory of the departed.

The *duplo* is drama in that the participants imagine themselves in a hypothetical situation, within which they play their part, im-

6. Some available works on Philippine drama are: Julian Cruz Balmaceda, *Ang Dulang Pilipino* (Manila: Institute of National Language, 1947); Raymundo C. Bañas, *Pilipino Music and Theater* (Quezon City: Manlapaz Publishing Co., 1969); Isagani Cruz, ed., *Short History of Theater in the Philippines* (Manila: n.p., 1971); and Jean Edades and Carolyn Fosdick, *Drama of the East and West* (Manila: Bookman, Inc., 1956).

provide their lines and exchange these in a spirit of pretense and play.<sup>7</sup>

Another custom with dramatic elements would be the *pamanhikan*, or the asking of a girl's hand in marriage. In some regions, this is still done in verse, with a representative speaking for the groom's family and someone answering (and making demands) for the bride's family.

The indigenous drama of the Filipino, therefore, was described and recorded by the Spaniards, but not recognized by them as such since it did not have the stages, costumes, scripts, and conventions that they had learned to expect from their own tradition. This drama, however — the various imitations of life done in ritual, dance or even play — was community-based drama at its purest. There was no division between the performer and the audience, since everyone in the audience was once or would sometime be, a performer. No explanation was ever needed for any of the presentations, for they were part of the communal life, and had meaning for everyone. It was created by the people for their needs, and presented for very direct purposes — to bring a particular good, to teach a definite role to the young, to consolidate the community in its common goals. In context, it was drama of a very high order.

#### THE PHILIPPINE THEATER IN THE SPANISH COLONIAL PERIOD

The Spanish conquest of the Philippines included, besides the assumed aim of subjugation, that of converting the Filipino heathen to Christianity and in the process hispanizing him. The missionaries who accompanied and followed the very first Spanish soldiers converted the natives to Catholicism as well as to the conquistador's way of life.

Spanish culture was introduced through Nueva España (Mexico), from where the Philippines was ruled by Spain through the Ministro de Ultramar. Soldiers of Adelantado Miguel Lopez de Legazpi in the late 16th century are believed to have been the ones who brought over from Mexico the metrical romances of chivalry or

7. See Teodoro E. Gener, *Duplo't Balagtasán* (Manila: Institute of National Language, 1949).

of the lives of saints and martyrs, which were popular in their day and which, in indigenized form, came to be the native *awit* and *corrido*. The friars, on the other hand, in their zeal for the Christianization of the natives, used many methods of communicating their message, including the drama or dramatization, a pedagogical tool long used by the Jesuits in their teaching.

#### COMEDIA

The first dramatizations were various *declamaciones graves*, *loas*, and *coloquios*, religious in content, taught by the friars to their Filipino students for such significant and festive occasions as the arrival of church notables, the feasts of saints, or the inaugurations of churches or schools. The first *representación enteramente teatral*, notes Retana as he cites Colin, was a comedia written in 1598 by Vicente Puche, a Jesuit, aboard a ship enroute to Cebu. Half of the first draft was blown into the sea, and Puche had to rewrite the play before the ship docked.

This first full-length play recorded (in Spanish dramaturgy, a comedia is a play in verse in three acts or *jornadas*) in "Latin and Romance" was then taught to elementary school children of Cebu to honor the first bishop-designate of Cebu, Fr. Pedro de Agurto. For the occasion, the elementary school the Jesuits were running in Cebu was elevated to a *colegio*, although it taught only reading, writing, and catechism.

In 1601, at the inauguration of the Colegio de San Jose, Fr. Juan de la Concepcion records that a *funcion teatral* marked the occasion, and included *oraciones Españoles* which, Retana notes, eventually bore such legitimate heirs as the Philippine *loas*.

The first play in the vernacular written by a Spaniard was on the martyrdom of Santa Barbara. Presented in Bohol in 1609 by a cast of Visayans, it had a great impact on the audience who, terrified by the tortures suffered by the martyr's father in contrast to the saint's happy ascent to Heaven, exclaimed: "This, then, will be our fate (eternal fire) if we abandon the true faith . . ." They then scorned their *bailanes*, and gave up their idols, amulets and "superstitious objects" to the Jesuits, who promptly burned them.

Notice of the beatification of St. Ignatius Loyola was received in Manila in 20 June 1611, and part of the celebrations included a "razonamiento a lo pastoril y vizcaino" done by twelve boys, *criollos* all, and a *breve coloquio en lengua tagala* by the *indio* students. The latter had three dances as *entremeses* or intermissions.

Retana notes other evidences of the Spanish colonizers teaching the Filipinos how to stage presentations, sometimes in Spanish, sometimes in the native tongue: in 1619, on the occasion of the arrival in Manila of the Papal Bull regarding the Immaculate Conception, a *comedia* on the beauty of Rachel, another on the martyrs of Japan, still another on the Immaculate Conception, another on the sale of Joseph, and finally one on the Prince of Transylvania, were staged. In 1623, when Philip IV became king, there were bullfights, *juegos de cañas*, and theatrical spectacles.

Finally comes the most famous *comedia* of all, the one in 1637 celebrating an actual victory of *cristianos* over *moros*. All this time, of course, while Christianization in certain areas proceeded apace, the Muslim Filipinos were still resisting the Spaniards, who sent expeditions to conquer them, forces headed by Spanish officers but manned by Filipino soldiers. These forces were often unvictorious, a fact carefully de-emphasized in the records available to most Filipinos. When a victory was gained, it was celebrated by the pealing of church bells, *Te Deums*, special Masses of thanksgiving, and grand honors and ceremonies.

One such celebration occurred when Sebastian Hurtado de Corcuera, who had been governor general of the Philippine since 1635, finally defeated the skillful Muslim leader Kudarat, whom the Spaniards called Cachil Corralat, near the Pulangui river in Magindanao. He did this by storming and taking the Muslim's hill-top stronghold, and driving him into the interior of the island.

Corcuera's victorious return was celebrated, by gubernatorial order, with an artillery salute from Bagongbayan, the pealing of bells, the singing of a *villancico*, and the reciting (and acceptance) of a congratulatory poem. This was in May. In June, in the port of Cavite, some boys acted out this victory by playing at *moros y cristianos*, with flags and wooden swords. The "fighting" became so intense that the boy who played Corralat fell off the *muralla* and had to have five stitches taken in his head.

The boys' game may or may not have inspired the play that was later conceived, but was significant, according to Retana, because in it "one sees, for the first time in the Philippines, the idea of *moros y cristianos* practiced in a theatrical mode . . ."

On 5 July of the same year, Father Hieronimo Perez's play, *gran comedia de la toma del Pueblo de Corralat, y conquista del Cerro*, was performed in church, with the Governor, the Audiencia, the Archbishop, and the *principalia* of the city of Manila in attendance.

This play has often been called the first *moro-moro* ever performed in the Philippines. A careful distinction should now be made. As Retana says, it was definitely the first *comedia* on a Philippine subject ever to be written or performed in the islands. It had genuine Philippine *moros* and Christians in it. However, it was almost surely in Spanish, and in the Spanish form. Therefore, it was a *comedia* and not a native *Komedya*, which is the other name for *moro-moro*. Moreover, this play had Filipinos (Muslims and Christians) as characters — while, as Retana also notes, in Philippine literature (dramatic literature, as well as *awit* and *corrido*), the *moro* was not the Malay Mohammedan of Mindanao and Jolo, but "always, invariably, the arrogant *moro*, the seducer, he of the long thick beard of imported literature, the *moro* of Spanish literature; in other words, the unknown *moro*, never the *moro* who for whole centuries attacked as often as he could the coasts of the Visayas and Luzon" (a reference to the Muslim pirates).<sup>8</sup>

In short, Fr. Perez's *gran comedia* was significant because it had an actual historical event as its subject matter, and was thus an early venture into the use of Philippine material for drama. It was not, however, a *moro-moro* and not even the ancestor of *moro-moros*, except possibly in form.

#### THE KOMEDYA

Where then, did the native *komedya* or *moro-moro* come from? Possibly from the *moros y cristianos*, a dance which the Mexican Indians had been dancing since 1530, and which included tales

8. On the *moro-moro* see Felicidad Mendoza, *The Comedia (Moro-Moro) Re-discovered* (privately printed, 1976).

about Charlemagne and the twelve peers of France. Certainly some — and this is obvious even if only from their titles alone — come directly from the metrical romances, the awit and corrido, which were the popular and secular reading matter available to the folk, e.g. *Don Juan Tiñoso*, *Doce Pares de Francia*, *Principe Atamante*, *Principe Baldovino*, *Principe Reynaldo*, etc.

The pattern for the vernacular *komedya* — and it was written in almost all vernaculars, and called *linambay* in Cebu, *Kumidya* or *kuraldal* in Pampanga, *ensayo* in Leyte, and *moros-moros* in Hiligaynon — was verse, in six-, seven-, eight-, or more generally twelve-syllable lines, usually in quatrains, and in enough *partes*, *bahagi*, *jornadas*, or *actos* to fill three to five hours for three to five or seven or thirty days. Like his fellow Asians — the Japanese, the Chinese, the Indonesian — the Filipino's sense of time for drama is definitely non-Western, his pace leisurely, his enjoyment unhurried.

The basic plot may have various codas and variations, but has the following general formula: a Christian princess falls in love with a Muslim prince, and/or a Muslim princess with a Christian prince. This is of course opposed by their fathers, the kings, for various possible reasons, besides the obvious one of religion. War is declared between the two camps, for this or for some other related or unrelated reason. "Armed to the teeth, the cavaliers of the respective parties march to and fro, haranguing each other in monotonous tones," as John Foreman, writing in 1899, describes the action. "After a longwinded, wearisome [to Western ears] challenge, they brandish weapons and meet in a series of single combats which merge in a general melee as the princes are vanquished and the hand of the disputed enchantress is won." Or, more likely, victories and/or miracles persuade the non-Christians to be baptized as Christians, and thus the loves are able to culminate in marriages.

These marathon performances occurred during town or barrio fiestas, on improvised platforms erected in fields or vacant lots, and could last for days or weeks, depending on the whims — and the budgets — of the committees or townspeople in charge. The audience brought their food, their benches, their babies, and ate as they watched their favorite scenes: the *batalla* (battle), when performers in a dazzling array of helmets, armor, brass buttons

and swords shook the timbers of the stage with their fencing (which used the movements of *arnis*); the *palasintahan* or love scenes, in which love (as instantaneous as in courtly days) was declared and accepted in many lyrical, dodecasyllabic rhyming quatrains; the laugh-provoking scenes where the *pusong* (clown or clowns) made jokes, poked fun at personages on or off stage, drank wine and ate food carried around in knapsacks, or fought mock battles; the scenes of magic and enchantment called *mahiya*, where ingenious "special effects" enabled flowers to bloom, waterfalls to suddenly spurt, graves to open, birds to fly, enchantresses to appear and disappear; the scenes of danger, when a prince had to do battle with some denizen of the wild — lion, bear, giant, bandit — met in the forest, or — graver danger — with a princess disguised as a man with whom he instantly fell in love once her identity was revealed; and the scenes of pathos, such as that of a king deposed, a queen violated, a princess exiled by a cruel father (*ang pagpapalayas ng prinsesa*).

By the time the Augustinian Fr. Joaquin Martinez de Zuñiga arrived in the late 18th century, he noted that the native comedia tended to "satisfy the sight rather than the sense of hearing," something that was probably quite natural for outdoor staging in a time without microphones. "If the so-called comedia or show," he wrote, "does not have three or four kings, many princes and princesses and many actors, if it does not have such wonderful feats and artifices as eagles that appear, lions, bears, and other animals that are fierce enough to swallow a man; if there are no apparitions or miracles, then that comedia was no good."<sup>9</sup>

Zuñiga's account of a comedia has a Christian princess falling in love with a Muslim prince, and the Christian prince arranging a *torneo* (tournament) so that the victor could win his daughter's hand. The Muslim prince, who befriends the Christian camp, displays valor and prowess. However, he cannot marry the princess because of his religion. The play ends after the Moro is converted to the Christian faith.

If, Zuñiga explains, a Muslim princess falls in love with a Christian prince, there is a problem, because the prince will never renounce his faith. He will find himself in dire situations. A *gigante*

9. Joaquin Martinez de Zuñiga, *Estadismo de las Islas Filipinas*, Vol. 1 Madrid: Imprenta de la Viuda de M. Minuesa de los Rios, 1893).

puts obstacles in his way; at times he fights lions and bears and is held up by highwaymen. But the religious image which his mother gave him before her death always saves him. The prince is imprisoned. If the Muslim princess frees him, it might cost him his life. The solution? He leads a war and becomes the victor. Or the Muslim princess embraces Christianity, while the prince is tragically killed. Sometimes, he is miraculously resuscitated.

The vernacular komedya, which eventually came to be performed in every part of the islands, in almost every vernacular, at almost every fiesta (where it was the principal attraction), and was the pivotal point for social structures such as that of the *comite de festejos* or the *hermano/hermana mayor* who saw to the funding of the production so that the people could view it for free, eventually came to be written not only by the town or barrio folk poet, but by such polished poets as Huseng Sisiw and Francisco Baltazar. It certainly was the major entertainment form of at least the second half of the Spanish era.<sup>10</sup>

It was also certainly a form that propagated a formula of fantasy and escape, with its kingdoms of Persia and Albanya, Turquia and Francia, its princes and princesses the likes of which the Philippine landscape would never see, whose problems only involved the unravelling of entangled loves, and never such pressing local problems as colonization, poverty, and exploitation. It also propagated in a visually spectacular and repetitious — therefore effective — fashion the message that the Muslim or Moro was to be scorned (unless, of course, he turned Christian, an unlikely happening in actual life) even if he was a fellow Filipino, and that Christianity always won the day. Thus, although the komedya was at least nominally secular drama, it was loaded with religious and colonial messages that, when absorbed by the enchanted and unsuspecting audience, eventually redounded to the benefit of the Spanish conqueror.

#### RELIGIOUS DRAMA

The Jesuits, who have long been known to use drama as part of their pedagogy, were the earliest to use religious dramatic and semi-dramatic forms — the declamaciones graves, the loa, the colo-

10. See, for example, Isabelo de los Reyes, *Ang Comediang Tagalog* (1904)

quo, the auto sacramental – to serve as audio-visual reinforcement in their teaching of religion. Aside from the play on the martyrdom of Sta. Barbara already mentioned, and the various dramas presented to mark significant occasions in the growing Philippine church, many a creative friar found ways of arousing interest in church rituals by dramatizing, for example, portions of the Passion of Christ during Lent, St. Helena's search for the true Cross, and Joseph and Mary's search for an inn on Christmas eve. These dramas and dramatizations, probably meant to attract the people to church as well as to impress on them, the meaning of the feast, were the germ and the basis of Philippine religious drama.

These dramatic observances have been classified by Dr. Nicanor G. Tiongson as: a) based on the liturgy; b) spin-offs from the liturgy (additions and embellishments); and c) based not on the liturgy but on the liturgical calendar. The *Siete Palabras*, for example, the dramatization of the seven last words on Good Friday, is based on the liturgy. The *Osana* – procession, singing, throwing of flowers – on Palm Sunday is an embellishment of the liturgy; and the *Santakrusan*, which has no liturgical base, finds its origin in the church calendar, in which a day in May is assigned to the celebration of the finding of the Holy Cross.<sup>11</sup>

These religious dramatic observances could also be classified according to length: a) the short dramatizations such as the *Salubong* and the *Panunuluyan*; and b) the full-length (and longer than full-length) dramas such as the *Sinakulo* (eight days long, from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday) and the *Tibag* (the komedya-style play on the search for and finding of the cross).

Among the most widespread practices in the islands is that of the *Salubong*, held early in the morning of Easter Sunday, in which the *karosas* of the Mater Dolorosa and the Risen Christ went their separate ways through the town, each leading a procession, one of female figures of the passion, the other of male. They meet at a prearranged spot, where a structure called a *galilea* is usually ready. From this, a child representing an angel is lowered, to remove the Virgin's mourning veil, and to sing "Regina Coeli, Laetare" (Queen of Heaven, Rejoice), since her

11. Nicanor G. Tiongson, "Ang Dulang Pilipino," *The Literary Apprentice* 44 (1976-77) and his "Mga Anyo ng Dulang Pilipino sa Dantaong ika-16 hanggang ika-18," *Kasaysayan* 1 (Nobyembre 1977).

Son has risen from the dead. Different towns with different budgets and imaginations have evolved different practices. It is said that in the San Roque district in Cavite City, the cherub used to be lowered from a tall building by a rope around her waist, but today a mechanical doll is used to do the job. In other places, intricate pulley arrangements raise and lower giant flowers or *puso* that enclose the "angel"; or a single pulley may pull up a child's highchair — with the child in it. Still other places are said to use doves to lift the veil.

The Sinakulo, best known of the full-length dramas, is still an annual institution in towns in Pampanga, Cavite, Bulacan, Rizal, and the regions of Luzon. It is believed to have originated around the 18th century, since the earliest *pasyon*, that of Gaspar Aquino de Belen, was written in 1704, and it is logical to assume that from chanting the *pasyon* aloud, some towns progressed to assigning parts, then to using costumes, and finally to acting out the parts in costume.

Most sinakulos, however are heavily based on the *Pasyong Henesis* (1814), since this provides much dramatic material, starting as it does with the creation of Adam and Eve, and ending with the Coronation of the Blessed Virgin in Heaven, as many full-length sinakulos do. Other sources dipped into by folk poets in search of material have been: other *pasyons*, like the *Pasyon Kandaba*; *Martir sa Golgota*, the translation of a Spanish fictionalized account of the life of Christ, from which are taken such colorful and beloved apocryphal characters as Samuel Belibet and Boanerhes, suitor to Mary Magdalen; various *awit* and short stories.

The opposing forces in the sinakulo are the forces of the good, represented by the *banal*, the holy ones (Jesus and Mary, slow of speech and movement, hands folded and eyes downcast in resignation and meekness); and the forces of evil, represented by the *Hudyo*, the rough, sharp-tongued soldiers, and the power — Herod, Pilate, Annas, and Caiphas — who sent Christ to his death.

The religious dramas, performed year after year by townspeople, were supported initially by the church, and eventually by the community at large, who contributed money or goods for the presentation; who wrote scripts, called rehearsals, made props and stage, and offered time, devotion, and *panata* vows to the project. Although at the present they may well be more of folk spectacles and community projects than religious observances, it is undeniable that they are part of the rural lifestyle and reflective of (pro-

bably also influential on) the people's worldview. Dr. Tiongson, in his book on religious drama in Malolos, Bulacan, points out that the meek, uncomplaining, all-accepting Christ held up by the *sinakulos* as a role model could well have contributed to the non-combativeness, subservience, and resignation of the Filipino who was a perfect colonial for so many years.<sup>12</sup>

He further points out that today, when the religious culture has changed, and the agricultural rhythm of life that allowed time for religious drama is changing to the eight-to-five lifestyle required by beginning industrialization, the *sinakulo* and other religious dramas are dying out. If the Filipino is to preserve this portion of his tradition, he has to consider how it can be made meaningful to the audience of today in their changed consciousness and circumstances.

#### SECULAR THEATER IN THE AMERICAN COLONIAL PERIOD: THE ZARZUELA AND THE DRAMA

By the 19th century, the Western variety of theater, namely scripted, costumed, and staged plays were a prominent reality in the Philippines. What Retana calls the *Teatro Tagalo* (or Ilocano, or Pampango, etc.) consisted mainly of the komedya and, at the proper times, of religious dramas and dramatizations.<sup>13</sup> By this time, however, komedyas were being written by such writers as poet Jose de la Cruz, called Huseng Sisiw, and his even more famous pupil, Francisco Baltazar, or Balagtas, whose extant komedya, *Orosman at Zafira*, shows to what a height of polish and style the komedya text had reached.

Still more inputs from Spain were being received on the drama scene. Not only were theaters being built, to house vernacular komedyas and Spanish comedias, but many groups of amateurs were staging plays, *peninsulares* and *Filipinos* were writing plays in Spanish, and troupes from Spain were coming in to perform and inject new influences into the local theater.

12. Nicanor G. Tiongson, "Kasaysayan at Estetika ng Komedya sa Parañaque" (Doctoral dissertation, University of the Philippines, 1979), and his *Kasaysayan at Estetika ng Sinakulo at ibang Dulang Panrelihiyon sa Malolos* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1975).

13. On the *Teatro Tagalo* one can consult Jose Rizal, "Barrantes y el Teatro Tagalog," *La Solidaridad* (5 June 1889), and Federico B. Sebastian, *Ang Dulang Tagalog* (Quezon City: Bede's Publishing House, 1951).

Cristina Buenaventura, in a study on the theaters of Manila (1846-1896), conjectures that the first Manila theaters were built in the 1820's or 1830's, since there is proof that the Teatro de Tondo was in operation before 1829, the year Husing Sisiw died.<sup>14</sup> Before this date, there were of course the makeshift theaters, the cockpits, the open air temporary and occasional stages. From then on a surprising array of theaters were built: the Tondo theater in 1834; a nipa-roofed theater on Arroceros in the 1840's; the Gran Coliseo de Binondo in 1846, "a real Spanish theater from the very beginning"; the Teatro del Principe Alfonso in 1862; the Teatro Circo de Bilibid which featured bull-fights at first, then symphonies, zarzuelas, comedies; the Teatro de Sibacon; the Teatro de Variedades; the Teatro Filipino in 1880, and eventually the famous Teatro Zorrilla in 1893, with its 1352 seats, and others — adding up to a total of twenty-six (in Manila alone) by the time of the Revolution.

The groups of amateur actors put on mainly repertoires of Spanish plays, a fact which made Spanish dramaturgy and Spanish theater available to the Filipino audience and writer. A very important influence in this regard was the arrival in the Philippines of professional theatrical artists, caused by the change of political temper in Spain.

A wave of political deportations brought Narciso de la Escosura and the actress Carlota Coronel (from the Teatro del Principe of Madrid) to Manila in 1848, to present *La Conjuracion de Venecia*, *La Pata de Cabra*, and *La Redoma Encantada*, the two latter *obras de magia*. When politics changed in Spain and they returned home, their favorable reports about Manila's reception of theater caused the Compañia del Teatro del Balon of Cadiz, directed by Manuel Lopez Ariza, to come in 1852 and perform *Isabel la Catolica*, *El Tio Canillitas*, and some *sainetes* by Ramon de la Cruz at the Binondo theater. Dario Cespedes presented, in late 1878 or early 1879, *Jugar con Fuego* and *El Barberillo de Lavapias*, zarzuelas the Filipino audience had seen.

Very important figures in the infusion of contemporary Spanish theater into the Philippines were director Alejandro Cubero, who has been called the "father of Spanish theater in the Philippines,"

14. Cristina L. Buenaventura, "The Theaters of Manila: 1846-1896," *Philippine Studies* 27 (1979): 5-37.

and zarzuela actress Elisea Ragner, who arrived in 1880. They not only presented plays, but trained the young Filipino actors who became the mainstays of the Spanish zarzuela in the Philippines: Praxedes (Yeyeng) Fernandez (who started performing at sixteen or seventeen), Patrocinio Tagaroma, Nemesio Ratia, and Jose Carvajal.

The writing of contemporary plays about Philippine subjects (as against Moro-Cristiano battles and religious topics) also started in the 19th century. Retana makes mention of: *La Conquista de Jolo*, a three-act drama in verse by Antonio Garcia del Canto, first performed on 11 June 1865, and inspired by the exploits of General Urbiztondo; *Una pagina de gloria* by Federico Casademunt and Regino Escalera, one act, in verse, first performed 23 April 1876, celebrating the Jolo campaigns of General Malcampo; *Republica . . . doméstica* about *costumbres manilenses*, by Casademunt and Escalera, in one act and in verse, first performed 30 June 1878; *Jose el carpintero* by Juan Zulueta de los Angeles, about *costumbres filipinas*, in one act and in verse, published 1880; Jose Rizal's *Junto al Pasig*, first performed at the Ateneo de Manila, 8 December 1880; the famous *Cuadros filipinos*, sainete by Francisco de Entrala, performed 1882, which aroused the ire of Filipinos who saw it as "savage burlesque of all that is Filipino"; and a comic review by Eduardo Saavedra first performed in Iloilo in March 1896, called *A 7 con 7 el pico o La llegada del 'peso insular'* y el fin de los contratos usurarios, which had to do with the price of sugar.

#### THE ZARZUELA

With the form introduced into the Philippine Spanish theater and to its Spanish and Filipino actors and writers, the turn of the century saw the next logical step, the true Filipinization of the zarzuela by means of its birth in the vernacular.<sup>15</sup>

The zarzuela, named after the Palacio de la Zarzuela near Madrid, where entertainments called *fiestas de zarzuela* were presented for the kings, is a play with music that existed in the Spanish theater long before it was given its name. It was popular

15. See, for example, Doreen G. Fernandez, *The Iloilo Zarzuela: 1903-1930* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1978).

theater, and when the more polished Italian operas came to Spain in 1703, the impresarios branded the zarzuela *un arte vulgar*, preferring the "high" tone of the opera.

In the Philippines, the first vernacular zarzuela was written in Pampanga: Mariano Proceso Pabalan Byron's *Ing Managpe*, first staged at the Teatro Sabina in Bacolor, Pampanga, on 1 September 1900. Its instant success was encouraging, and within the next decade, almost every other region developed its zarzuelas. In Pangasinan, Catalino Palisoc wrote *Say limang ag nagketket, pampinsiwan* in 1901; in Iloilo Valente Cristobal wrote *Ang Capitan* in 1903; and Severino Reyes premiered his one-act zarzuela *Ang Kalupi* in April 1902 (when it was double-billed with his anti-komedy *R.I.P.*, which caused demonstrations and stone-throwing by the *komedyantes*) and his three-act *Walang Sugat* on 14 June 1902.<sup>16</sup>

The Filipino zarzuela, as it developed, was principally about domestic life — obedient or disobedient children, negligent or devoted parents, problems brought about by gambling or drinking or politics or poverty, and, most of the time, problems and complications involving love (rich boy-poor girl and vice-versa; conflicting suitors, each favored by a parent; love between servants, children, parents). Again and again, the Filipino folk writers — there were no professionals to speak of except perhaps in Manila — played variations on the domestic theme, thus reflecting the concerns and perceptions of Filipino daily life.

How did the plots unravel? Reyes' *Walang Sugat* is about Julia and Temyong, who loved each other but had to be parted because Temyong had to go to war. Julia, as an obedient daughter, had to accede to her mother's wish that she marry Miguel, a rich but slow-witted nephew of the parish priest. A message sent to Temyong brings him back in the nick of time to save her from marriage — through a ruse. A side plot reveals the still-fresh resentment against the Spanish friar, for Temyong's father and other villagers are tortured and deceived by dastardly friars.

Servando de los Angeles' *Ang Kiri* is about a *dalagang masaya* who had suitors of wealth and political power, but fell in love with a country boy. When he marries his country sweetheart, she realizes

16. See Reyes' work, *Ang Dulang Tagalog* (Manila: Institute of National Language, 1938).

the folly of her ways, and accepts the faithful Jose, poet and long-time suitor. Precioso Palma's *Paglipas ng Dilim* is about the romance between the *mahinhin* Estrella and the newly-graduated doctor Ricardo, which the flirt Caridad tries to sunder. Patricio Mariano's *Anak ng Dagat* has Nene, who had grown up as a fisherman's daughter, finding out that she is a rich man's heir, which makes Carlos, the poet she loves, stay away (rich and poor being worlds apart). They find happiness in the end.<sup>17</sup>

The one-act zarzuelas had little vignettes about husbands who bet at the cockfights and lost all their money; wives who played *panguingue*; widows and widowers planning marriage and hiding the fact from their respective offspring; possessive fathers guarding precious daughters; disobedient daughters realizing the folly of their ways — all the little foibles and fictions reflective of Filipino family concerns.

The zarzuela songs, which functioned as part of the dialogue, served as exposition (of mood, of situation, of feelings), development, comic interlude, or even simply musical pause. As in the opera, which was beginning to be viewed in Manila at this time, there were solos, duets, trios, sextets, and grand choruses — depending on the availability of singers and on the length and magnitude of the zarzuela (a one act-play had a single situation; a three-act play or *zarzuela grande* had greater scope and depth).

These songs became the song hits of the period, for example Hermogenes Ilagan's *Dalagang Bukid's* "Nabasag ang Banga." The stars, like Atang de la Rama, were the folk heroes and heroines of the day. The professional troupes usually opened the new zarzuelas at the Zorilla, then went on to perform at the smaller theaters, and then to play one-night stands at the town and barrio fiestas all over Luzon and the larger southern cities. The towns and barrios generally had their own writers, zarzuelas, and zarzuela troupes, and these performed at fiestas, and could even be hired for a fee by other towns not blessed with their own theatrical companies. The town of Meycauyan, Bulacan, for example, at one time had eight zarzuela troupes operating independently of each other. The late Aurelio Estanislao remembers first hearing Atang de la Rama sing in his hometown of Bocaue

17. Mariano's work is taken up by Concepcion S. Javier, *Ang Mga Dula ni Patricio Mariano* (Manila: Institute of National Language, 1940).

as a child, and how mothers would shush their crying babies, and refuse to go home to cook dinner, because "*Kumakanta pa si Atang.*"

Thus, although it made a dramatic entrance in Manila through Severino Reyes' attack against the komedya (*R.I.P.*), the zarzuela started entering Philippine consciousness in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, in Spanish. First it was Spanish plays performed by Spanish actors; then Spanish plays performed by Philippine actors; then plays written by Filipinos in Spanish about Philippine subjects or events, and performed by Philippine actors; and finally, at about the turn of the century, zarzuelas in various Philippine vernaculars about Philippine matter.

The Philippine zarzuela provided what can be called the first professional Philippine theater, namely, actors and actresses and troupes who earned their living from performing in zarzuelas; authors and composers who were mainly zarzuela-creators; theaters — like the famous Zorrilla — that were mainly for the zarzuela; and a whole supportive world of stage designers and painters (in Pandacan, it was said, in one day, one could rent or obtain all that was necessary for a zarzuela), costume makers and rental firms, orchestras, etc.

The zarzuela, with its music and dances and party scenes, appealed to the music-loving Filipino (one notices the same ingredients appealing in present-day movies), especially since the stories were now neither about imagined moros and cristianos, nor about biblical characters, but about men and women recognizable and even identifiable with oneself.

#### THE DRAMA

*Drama* or prose play turned vernacular at about the same time as the zarzuela, generally speaking.<sup>18</sup> Certainly one of the earliest recorded dramas was Cornelio Hilado's *Ang Babai nga Huaran*, written in 1878 and first published in 1889 in Iloilo. This was

18. For some representative works on Philippine drama, see: Juan S. Aguas, *Juan Crisostomo Soto and Pampangan Drama* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1963); Tomas C. Hernandez, *The Emergence of Modern Drama in the Philippines (1898-1912)* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1976); Alejandro G. Hufana, *Mena Pecson Crisolago and Iloko Drama* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1963); and Lilia Realubit, *The Bicol Dramatic Tradition* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1976).

a heavily didactic piece about two fathers, one over-indulgent and the other prudent; two daughters, one spoiled and the other obedient and virtuous; two young men, one who chooses a wife for beauty, and the other one who chooses his wife for her virtue. Tomas Remigio's anti-Spanish verse drama, *Malaya*, was written in Spain in 1898, but first staged on August 26, 1902. It was also Tomas Remigio who wrote the oldest extant comic drama, *Mga Santong Tao*, which is about a *cura*, a sacristan, and a piskal, all lusting after a poor peasant's wife, and getting humiliated by their victim in amusing and appropriate ways.

The dramas were mostly in prose, and came to be predominantly romantic and/or tragic and/or comic. Lacking the lightening effect of the zarzuela song, they came to bear the "heavier" – and usually more lachrymose – themes that today we associate with soap opera and tear-jerking movies. Occasionally they had songs, but these were not integral to the dialogue, but were, for example, patriotic songs in the dramas with political themes. The latter, called "seditious" by the Americans, were the drama's moment of glory.<sup>19</sup>

The Filipinos, who had just driven away a colonial master of three hundred years, only to realize that the "friend" who had offered help was now the new colonial master, felt an anger that boiled over and erupted in the drama. Such playwrights as Juan Abad, who wrote *Tanikalang Guinto* (1903), Juan Matapang Cruz, author of *Hindi Aco Patay*, and Aurelio Tolentino, who is famous for *Kahapon, Ngayon at Bukas* (1903), spoke out their protest against the new colonizers. What seemed to be dramas of family life or unhappy romances, were read clearly by the Filipino audiences as they were meant to be: thinly veiled allegories in which Liwanag, the heroine of *Tanikalang Guinto* was enticed by her sly *amain*, Maimbot, not to marry her sweetheart, Kaulayaw. Maimbot's gift of a golden bracelet eventually became a chain that bound her – clear analogy for America and her gifts that bound. Inang Bayan, the heroine of *Kahapon, Ngayon at Bukas*, had seen her son Taga-ilog imprisoned by the Spanish government, Matanglawin, and been tricked by Halimaw, the Spanish friar, with the help of treacherous natives Asalhayop and Dahumpalay. Small

19. See Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio, *The "Seditious" Tagalog Playwrights: Early American Occupation* (Manila: Zarzuela Foundation of the Philippines, Inc., 1972).

wonder that she warned her children, after the defeat of the Spaniards, about the new "friend," Malaynatin, the American government, from whom she begged and whom she eventually challenged, for freedom.

These plays were staged at a time when the sedition law forbade "printing, publishing or circulating any handbill, newspaper or publication, advocating . . . independence or separation," the flag law forbade the flying of the Philippine flag, and the *Himno Nacional* could not be played or sung without risk of punishment.

The playwrights took the risk and were imprisoned for their valor — some, like Aurelio Tolentino, more than once.<sup>20</sup> Producers and directors ran other risks, like introducing characters in the flag colors to form the flag onstage at a given signal; or suddenly having the whole cast sing the national anthem at the end of a play; or even having an unscheduled speech or verse, sometimes by a rebel in hiding. Little wonder that the theater of that time was so exciting, so unpredictable, and as vital as a newspaper, since it reflected direct and courageous protest.

After 1907, when the first National Assembly was called, the anger seems to have died down, and the dramas thereafter played on predictable formulae of family conflict and tragedy, romantic triangles, and the like. An example would be Jose Maria Rivera's *Esperanza* (1916), about a lady who has put a colorful past behind her, but is still spurned by her husband's rich family. His illness brings the problem to a head, and a sudden inheritance brings a happy ending. One of the most famous romantic dramas would be Cirio H. Panganiban's *Veronidia* (1919), in which Veronidia has left her husband for Cristino, a childhood suitor, and now is torn with remorse, especially since her husband is dying and their only child is with him. Cristino's pride will not allow him to let her go to Rosauo, and so in the end he stabs her. The play was first shown in Panganiban's hometown, Bocaue, but it became a great hit and "flooded the theater with tears" in 1927, when Atang de la Rama, then "Queen of the Zarzuela" and indeed of Philippine professional theater of the day, and acclaimed poet Jose Corazon de Jesus played the title roles. The drama type of plot may still be seen in contemporary survival in the lachry-

20. For Tolentino's work, see Edna Z. Manlapaz, ed., *Selected Writings of Aurelio Tolentino* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Library, 1975).

mose movies depicting family tragedies, martyred mothers, and love triangles, as well as in the radio soap operas and situation comedies of television today.

If the 20's and the 30's were a theater world, with the Filipinos happily viewing reflections of their own lives in the dramas and zarzuelas on stage, one might ask why these eventually faded away from the dramatic scene? There were at least three reasons.

First, the English language had by the 30's become established as the language of the educated, the intelligentsia, and the elite. Consequently, the thinking audience that could have pushed this quasi-realistic theater into a real age of realism, had turned to English and had begun staging Shakespeare and Shaw, or else the plays being written in English by such Filipinos as Carlos P. Romulo, Vidal Tan, and Jorge Bocobo. (The first play in English by Filipinos was *A Modern Filipina* by Jesusa Araullo and Lino Castillejo written in 1915.) Thus, although theater in English was far from established and was never to become the going concern that vernacular theater was at this time, the English language and the people's attitudes to it made inroads into their attitude to the vernacular theater, which came to be relegated in their thinking to the uneducated, the young, or the provincial audiences.

Secondly, there was serious competition from two newer entertainment forms: vaudeville and the movies, especially the "talkies." These were new, they brought with them the "new," the "progressive" American culture, and they were very accessible. Filipino films, moreover, inherited plots, stars, and even style from both zarzuela and drama.

Thirdly, the zarzuelas and dramas themselves had become stereotyped. "Obras maestrás" and copies and variations of these were played, replayed, copied, parlayed in different vernaculars. The same characters walked the stages: mahinhin dalagas, loyal heroes, strict fathers, suffering mothers, in a chess game with various combinations and plays, but with the unvaryingly happy ending, often brought on by some forced resolution, usually a *deus ex machina* or two. Real problems were touched upon: gambling, family relationships, rich versus poor, even usury and land tenancy and exploitation, but the problems were not thought through, but hurriedly marshalled onward to the ending when the loyal suitor eventually somehow, won the mahinhin heroine. As in the komedya, this theater still worked with formulae, and not with

ideas, offering reassurance, not analysis. The stage of realism and ideas might possibly have come as a later development, had not the age of the zarzuela and the drama ended in the '30's.

The zarzuela and the drama, however, were significant in that they were, first, indoor theater predominantly in prose — and therefore better suited to realistic and more intimate situations than the outdoor, grandiloquent verse theater had been. Secondly, they handled Filipino subject matter — stories, lives, foibles, values — directly, when the komedyas and sinakulos had only touched these incidentally, peripherally, or accidentally.

#### VAUDEVILLE

Vaudeville, which had originated in France, was introduced to the Philippines by the Americans, mainly as entertainment for American troops. Filipino *vod-a-vil* or *bodabil* was introduced in 1916 by Sunday Reantaso upon his return from the United States, but the credit for really establishing the form belongs to Borromeo Lou (Louis Borromeo who arrived from the US in 1921), whose troupe performed at the Savoy and the Empire and introduced chorus girls, jazz, minstrel songs, skits, variety acts, and such showbiz history names as Dimples, Toy Toy, Hanasan, and the Alabama brothers.<sup>21</sup>

Vaudeville eventually developed such names as Katy de la Cruz, Canuplin, Bayani Casimiro, Vicente Ocampo of the famous “Chit-chi-rit-chit” (whom Daisy H. Avellana calls “the greatest star in vaudeville”), the impresario Jose Zarah who staged “extravaganzas,” and many others.

In later years vaudeville was to degenerate to the Clover theater show, then to burlesque, then to excuses for girlie and strip shows that were eventually banned from decent theaters and relegated to sleazy bars and cheap theaters. In its heyday, however, it was the venue by which American musical culture came painlessly, effortlessly, and almost unnoticeably into Philippine life. The famous names — except for a few, like Atang de la Rama, who only sang *kundimans* — were known for songs or dances or comedy acts that were local versions of American vaudeville acts. Katy

21. See Augusto A. Pangan, Jr., “A Descriptive Study of Philippine Vaudeville” (Undergraduate thesis, Ateneo de Manila University, 1979).

de la Cruz was a torch singer a la Sophie Tucker; Canuplin confessedly copied Charlie Chaplin, but eventually developed his own pathos and humor; Bayani Casimiro started out as the Philippine Fred Astaire; the chorus girls tried for the precision of the Rockettes and the singers all sang American hits. The culmination of this is seen in the profusion of contests for "The \_\_\_\_\_ (Johnny Mathis, Joni James, Elvis Presley, Timi Yuro, Perry Como, etc.) of the Philippines."

Was vaudeville drama? Only incidentally and fragmentally. A vaudeville show was a variety show, which usually included a comedy skit — the "drama portion". During the Japanese occupation, however, since there was a dearth of movies and indeed of entertainment, a group led by Lamberto V. Avellana, which became the nucleus of the later Barangay Theater Guild, put on "stage shows" which were vaudeville modified with a bias for drama. A stage show had a full-length play — in Tagalog, since English was not looked upon with favor by the Japanese authorities — followed by songs and dances and comedy acts by such greats as Tugo and Pugo. Dramatic Philippines, led by Narciso Pimentel, Jr., staged plays translated from English or written especially for the troupe, e.g. Francisco "Soc" Rodrigo's translation of *Cyrano de Bergerac*; the famous Lenten play *Martir sa Golgota*; and the off-replayed *Sino ba Kayo* by Julian Cruz Balmaseda (originally written as *Sangkuwaltang Abaka*, modified in 1943 for staging by the group).

In Japanese-occupied Manila, the stage show served not only to keep up spirits, but also to communicate messages of hope to the audience ("Darating na si Mang Arturo [MacArthur]."). Backstage was also said to have served as a message drop for the guerrillas, and a song-code was worked out to warn any guerrillas in the audience whenever the Kempetei entered the theater and they had to leave.

After the Japanese occupation, vaudeville went back to its concern with copying and aping American performers. Although it produced some "originals" like the Reycard Duet, it has since fallen on bad times, with shows that contain vulgar skits, acrobatic acts, and "fashion shows" that are a flimsy excuse for parading flimsily clad girls who often engage in lewd actions that would never have been allowed on the old vaudeville stage. It sur-

vives, in a way, in the variety show on television, which has a little of everything, but hardly any drama left to dignify it with the name.

### PHILIPPINE THEATER IN ENGLISH

The writing and staging of Philippine plays written in English started before the Pacific war, but took on impetus after 1945, when the American presence returned, even more strongly, since it came with "Liberation." Most of this activity was centered in schools, which of course were the centers of speaking and writing English. Notable in this regard are: the UP Dramatic Club directed by Wilfrido Maria Guerrero and, before him, Jean Edades; the Ateneo Dramatic Guild directed by Henry L. Irwin, S.J. and later James B. Reuter, S.J.; the Arena Theater based in the Philippine Normal College, headed by Severino Montano; the Aquinas Dramatic Guild of the University of Sto. Tomas; and later the Paulinian Players' Guild directed by Daisy Hontiveros Avellana.

Although many of the plays staged were foreign, there was an occasional effort to stage a Philippine play, especially at the University of the Philippines, which had the advantage of having playwright Wilfrido Ma. Guerrero in residence. Guerrero, Ermita-bred and educated in the English era, was an authentic voice of his generation and his class — the class and the generation that would logically be speaking the kind of English he wrote.

Semi-professional groups also existed — non-school based, but unable to exist exclusively on theater — most notably the Barangay Theater Guild headed by Lamberto V. Avellana and Daisy Hontiveros Avellana, which premiered with great success Nick Joaquin's *Portrait of the Artist as Filipino*, certainly one of the greatest plays of the Philippine theater in English.

An encouragement to the writing of plays in English were the Palanca awards, which since 1954 included the one-act play as a category in prizes.<sup>22</sup> However, since the award did not include assurance of or funding for production, many of the plays remained what Alberto Florentino has called "filing cabinet drama," in that as property of the prize-giving body, they were neither

22. Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards, *Anthologies of Award Winners in English and Tagalog I, II, III*.

published nor staged, but kept filed. A few groups — and theater groups then came up and disappeared literally like mushrooms — staged these. Occasionally a playwright would exert effort to get his plays published, or get a school or other group to stage his play. But it was not till the '60's that the Palanca Awards Committee started committing funds for the publication of Palanca plays; and not till the '70's that funds were committed to production.

Among the prominent winners of Palanca awards for plays in English were Alberto Florentino, Wilfrido Nollado, Nestor Torre, Jesus Peralta, Fidel Sicam, and Estrella Alfon.

#### THE RETURN TO THE VERNACULAR

By the early '60's, theater people were noticing how difficult it was to draw audiences to plays.<sup>23</sup> Some blamed the audience's lack of exposure to drama; others cited the need for education. A few realized that the problem was language; that although some Filipinos had the command of the language necessary to write works like Guerrero's plays and Joaquin's *Portrait*, English was still not the language of the heart, much less of the gut, of the majority. Thus, audiences were limited to the highly educated, to those devoted to theater, and to the relatives of those devoted to theater. Listening to theater in English, the Filipino became preoccupied with the actor's ability to speak English, and not with the play and its core.

Onofre Pagsanghan, with his background in drama and theater at the Ateneo under Fr. Henry L. Irwin, S.J., acted upon this realization by adapting Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* into *Doon Po Sa Amin*, making Grover's Corners Barrio San Roque; the editor, a high school principal; the soda fountain, a halo-halo counter, etc. Ronaldo Tinio, fresh from an MFA at the University of Iowa and theater training in England, decided that Pilipino was absolutely as capable as English or any European language to contain the whole range of ideas and emotions found in Western drama, and proved this by successfully translating and staging such plays as Tennessee Williams' *Glass Menagerie* (*Laruang*

23. For representative collections of Filipino plays see: Alberto Florentino, ed., *Outstanding Filipino Short Plays* (Manila: Filipiniana Publishers, 1961) and Simplicio Flores and M. Jacobo Enriquez, *Sampung Dulang Tig-iisang Yugto* (Manila: Philippine Book Company, 1973).

*Kristal*), Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (*Pahimakas ng Isang Ahente*).

The Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) was founded by Cecile Guidote, who, during her studies in theater at Baylor University, had dreamed of a theater that would reach the people. It started out by staging Philippine plays in English, but found its place in the Philippine theatrical scene when it found its home theater, the Fort Santiago ruins that are now the Dulaang Raha Sulayman. There it staged Virginia Moreno's *Straw Patriot*, translated into *Bayaning Huwad*, and Joaquin's *Portrait*, translated into *Larawan*. From then on, PETA was committed to Pilipino, doing adaptations, translations, but mainly new plays in Pilipino, gaining experience and an audience, and forging the style and orientation that make it today's premiere theater group.

Still other forces cooperated with the above to bring Philippine theater back to the vernacular: history and social movements. The 60's were a troubled time for the Philippines. National problems precipitated not only a reexamination of ideas and structures, but a rise of nationalism and of student activism. Theater was one of the most active forms taken by this activism.

Proletarian theater, also called committed theater, national democratic theater, engaged theater, people's theater, activist theater, corrective theater, agit-prop (agitation-propaganda) theater, workers' theater, radical theater, leftist theater, and revolutionary theater, was all that, since it was committed to informing the people of their rights, of the exploitation perpetrated against them, of all the *isms* ranged against them (imperialism, capitalism, feudalism, fascism, bureaucrat capitalism), of their own ignorance of the graft and corruption in the government; and since it was theater meant not only to entertain and inform, but also to persuade and activate.

It was street theater in that it abandoned buildings and auditoriums, and took to the streets, Plaza Miranda, campuses, factories, churches, sidewalks, the tops of trucks, the shade under the trees, even the steps of the Cultural Center — wherever the proper audience was for the message to be projected. It was not confined to the standard theater hours, but could be presented at any time of the day or night, during a demonstration or march, during a strike or sitdown protest, in a quadrangle to disrupt classes.

The theater style was much influenced by Chinese revolutionary theater (such films as "The East is Red" and "Red Detachment of Women" were shown here at the time), but also picked up from all the styles of Western theater that had been learned in theater classes and by watching plays in English through the years. Because of the mobility and flexibility necessary, arena-style theater, or pantomime, or any other combination of styles needing minimal props was used. Because the audience was generally heterogeneous, ambulant, and composed mainly of the masses, allegory and expressionism were much used, sometimes in the broad gestures and satirizing reminiscent of traditional theater. Some theater groups even wove in the folk dance and the folk song (with modified lyrics) to link the content of their theater to the experience of their audience.

This was theater of ideas, at last; theater that analyzed and explained, and suggested solutions and actions. The language, but naturally, was Pilipino. The characters were types, representative of whole classes. On these last two counts — language and characters as types — the proletarian theater had links to traditional theater. Still another link was the fact that most of them were communal creations, and written for definite audiences (urban or rural, Plaza Miranda or a particular strike-bound company).

The significance of this theater was that it took Philippine theater beyond the stages of entertainment, escape, and exposition, and into the further stages of ideas, analysis, and persuasion. In this they can be linked to the protest plays of the early years of the American regime, the difference being that they were much more direct — sometimes shockingly so.

In proletarian theater of the late 60's and early 70's, Philippine theater had ventured a long way from the colonial theater of the Spanish period, and had made a leap into theater of ideas, picking up from the tradition of protest begun in 1903. Proletarian theater ended with imposition of Martial Law in 1972.

#### THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE

On the contemporary scene one finds a panorama of drama and theater that reflects the whole stream of more than four hundred

years of Philippine theater. Among the Muslim Filipinos and the ethnic minorities are still the rituals, songs, dances and customs of indigenous theater. In the towns and barrios distant or far enough from the encroachment of mass media are still visible remnants of Spanish colonial theater – religious dramas and dramatizations, the komedya – some little changed from the nineteenth century, some vastly changed by the influence of media (e.g. the use of movie background music; costumes influenced by “The Ten Commandments”, the use of floodlights and filters). The zarzuela still survives in some towns and, because music is always viable, has undergone many contemporizing scene changes to emergence as “modern” zarzuelas or musicals or rock operas, e.g. Virgilio Almario’s *Bernardo Carpio*; Amelia Lapeña Bonifacio’s *Ang Bundok*; Bienvenido Lumbera’s *Ang Palabas Bukas*; Domingo Landicho’s *Sumpang Mahal* among them.

Most of the plays being written and presented, however, are in the realistic temper, reflecting the problems, concerns, and ideas of the present-day Filipino. The age of realism of Philippine theater is upon us, brought in through the Western education offered in our schools, learned from Western models or on study grants or trips abroad, and developed by the need to understand and express the complexity of modern life.

Thus, the majority of the plays being written are in the strain of social realism, where man is seen as an individual functioning in and being acted upon by society. Here belong the plays about poverty, about injustice and oppression, about the powerful and powerless, about the problems of particular sectors like the *batilyos*, the squatters, the landless tenants, beggars, and scavengers.

There are also plays of psychological realism, about the problems created in individuals by their particular traumas, environments, networks of family and heredity, and opportunity – plays about the expatriate, the homosexual, the alienated; about the generation gap; about father-son conflicts; about marital discord.

Many plays use legend and history to understand contemporary problems – thus the numerous plays drawn from or developing various parts of the Rizal novels; the plays about Bonifacio and Valentin de los Santos and Dagohoy; the reinterpretations of Bernardo Carpio and folktale and myth.

All the styles in the modern theater repertoire are used: epic theater, expressionism, theater of the absurd, allegory, shadow

play, puppet theater, mask influences, Kabuki, Noh, etc. Even styles from traditional theater — duplo, komedya, zarzuela — are beginning to be explored as vehicles for “Now” messages.

Theater groups exist in schools, of course, where the study of plays and theater techniques is at hand, and available for experimentation. The better known troupes are the U.P. Repertory Company, which stages traditional and contemporary Philippine plays, and has touring groups that perform outside the campus; the Mindanao State University’s Sining Kambayoka, which has created a unique theater style based on an indigenous folk form, the *bayok*, which it has applied to both folkloric and contemporary subject matter; and the Ateneo High School’s Dulaang Sibol, which is seen by the director, Onofre Pagsanghan, as a force for the formation of the young, rather than as training ground for the professional theater man. However, Dulaang Sibol’s poetic, symbolic style is a strong and definite presence in today’s theater, especially since it trains its members in writing plays and music, designing and crafting scenery and props — all within a minimal budget — very relevant training for theater in a Third World country.

The nearest to a professional theater group the country has is PETA which manages its PETA-CITASA workshops, its Kalinangan Ensemble, its Teen Theater, and its outreach training programs in a professional and organized manner. However, its members get minimal fees, and have to hold other jobs, not being able to subsist only on theater. Its regular seasons of Filipino plays, all located within a definite social perspective, draw a predominantly urban crowd from a wide range of social levels, that packs its performances.

Aside from the above groups, however, there are innumerable others, each with their own thrust and their own audiences: Dulaang Babaylan, which specializes in the revival and updating of traditional plays; Teatro Kabataan, which runs training programs that draw drop-outs, professionals, students to its little theater in the suburbs; and all the other theater groups in churches, communities, barrios, housing projects, towns, private homes, etc. All have very little money, all depend on sponsors, donations, ticket sales, the loan of props and costumes, the dedication of members, the generosity of theater experts (e.g. Adul de Leon,

Joonee Gamboa, the PETA directors and artists) and scholars who help out with lectures and workshops and advice.

The Philippines today, in 1980, does not have a national theater as it is understood in the First World nations – a complex of buildings and people, state-supported, devoted to a nation's theater, both in tradition and change. What it does have is a complex of people and small communities, all devoted to theater that is, in many and various ways, authentically Philippine.