

Salvador Bernal and Modernism in Philippine Stage Design

JOSE B. CAPINO

ATENEO DE MANILA UNIVERSITY

PHILIPPINES



The distinguished career of Salvador Bernal, the country's premier scenic designer, was accorded a fitting tribute in June, 2003 with the conferral upon him, by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, of the National Artist Award. Although he is the first person to receive the presidential distinction for theater design, he finds himself in the good company of the nation's finest visual artists, many of whom, like Bernal, are avowed modernists.

Like the minimalist Arturo Luz or the cubist Ang Kiukok, both fellow national artists, Bernal engraves striking images upon a canvas, albeit on the gigantic scale of cycloramas, scrims and proscenium stages. His strokes are bold, often Spartan, with a painter's acuity for line and color, and an extraordinary sensitivity to texture. His mastery of the modernist visual repertoire is evident in his unabashedly painterly designs: expressionism in the skewed geometry and the emotive brushwork of *Paglipas ng Dilim* (When Darkness Fades, Precioso Palma, 1920, *Fig. 1*); impressionism in the wavy, broken strokes of *Rajah Sulayman* (1975, *Fig. 2*); minimalism in the stark figures and lines of *Odysseus* (1981, *Fig. 3*).

When Bernal counter-intuitively deploys flatness in the theatre, he does so with the same self-reflexive purpose that cubists, impressionists and expressionists emphasize the two-dimensionality of the canvas and the artificiality of the painted form. His use of portals—those painted frames that create additional prosceniums on stage—rarely enhance depth; instead they squash the space between foreground and background, creating a shallowness that perpetually reminds the spectator of the dimensions, and thus the artifice, of theatrical space. When he creates depth within an overarching aesthetic of flatness, it is as



FIG. 1 *PAGLIPAS NG DILIM*

(TANGHALANG PILIPINO, DIRECTED BY FELIX PADILLA, 1992)



FIG. 2 *RAJAH SULAYMAN*

(BALLET PHILIPPINES, CHOREOGRAPHED BY ALICE REYES, 1975)

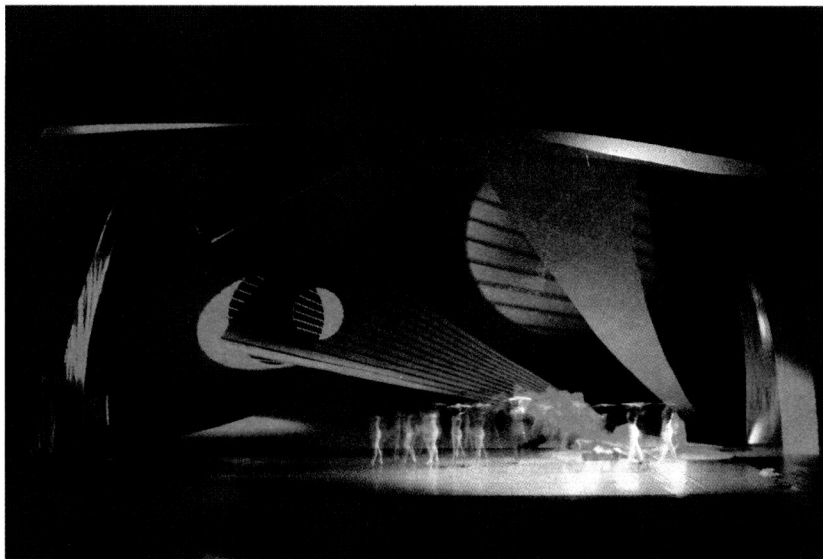


FIG. 3 *ODYSSEUS*

(BALLET PHILIPPINES, CHOREOGRAPHED BY NORMAN WALKER, 1981)

well in the modernist tradition, through the devices of collage and montage. His design for Hermogenes Ilagan and Leon Ignacio's zarzuela, *DALAGANG BUKID* (Country Lass; FIG. 4) deploys a decoupage of old time advertisements and floral wrapping paper to evoke the commingling of materialism and puritanical virtues at the first decade of American colonial rule in the Philippines. His minimalist design for the Singapore Lyric Opera production of Giuseppe Verdi's *IL TROVATORE* (The Troubadour, FIG. 5), which transports the setting into the late 19th century Philippine revolution against Spain, creates dynamic juxtapositions by masking printed details of old photographs on tarpaulin cloth with panels of metal bars evoking, among other things, traditional Filipino windows constructed out of wood and mother-of-pearl.

Because a significant portion of classics and new plays are set during the pre-modern period, Bernal has perfected the art of negotiating the potential conflicts between his modernist aesthetic and the ancient, baroque, or Victorian settings of the works he tackles. One often finds him peppering his designs with anachronistic modernist emblems, as in the case of the robotic alligators and the automated revolution machine



FIG. 4 *DALAGANG BUKID*
(TANGHALANG PILIPINO, DIRECTED BY FELIX PADILLA, 1987)



FIG. 5 *IL TROVATORE*
(SINGAPORE LYRIC OPERA, DIRECTED BY LEOW SIAK FAH, 1991)

of *EL FILIBUSTERISMO: THE MUSICAL* (Paul Dumol and Jovy Miroy, 1991, FIG.6), or fusing wildly disparate elements together, as in the case of his cubist set and costumes for the religious cloak-and-dagger drama, *TIBAG* (Fruto Cruz, 1905, FIG. 7).



FIG. 6 *EL FILIBUSTERISMO: THE MUSICAL* JAPAN PRODUCTION
(TANGHALANG PILIPINO, DIRECTED BY FELIX PADILLA, 1993)



FIG. 7 *TIBAG*
(TANGHALANG PILIPINO, DIRECTED
BY FELIX PADILLA, 1999)

Apart from his strong ties to modernist painting, his work in the theatre—a composite art—also binds him to sculpture, dance, music and performance, and thus to the fugitive dimensions of time, space and motion. For a modern dress Japanese production of *ROMEO AND JULIET* (1998, FIG. 8), directed by longtime collaborator Felix Padilla, Bernal stages the famous balcony scene in a skeletal tower with a whimsically shaped glass canopy that responds interestingly to variations in light. His gigantic bust of Julius Cesar, which towers over the tiny black box theater, weeps blood at key moments before dramatically crumbling at the end of the play. The geometric lotus flower in his set



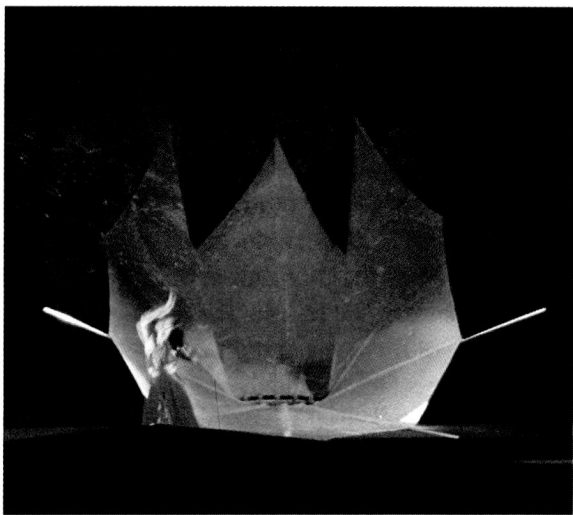
FIG. 8 *ROMEO AND JULIET*

(BUNKAMURA THEATER COCOON, DIRECTED BY FELIX PADILLA, 1998)

for Nicanor Tiongson's *REALIZING RAMA* (1998, FIG. 9) not only transforms beautifully in light and motion but is also dynamically reshaped by the movement of actors and dancers. Indeed, Bernal's designs are not just painterly and sculptural but, more importantly, consummately theatrical.

The modernism of Bernal's approach extends beyond the visual aspects of the theater. As a poet and dramaturg, he engages both the literary dimensions of the dramatic text and its performative dimensions

FIG. 9
REALIZING RAMA
 (ASEAN COCI,
 CHOREOGRAPHED
 BY DENISA REYES,
 1998)



with the same audacious parsimony that he approaches their visual rendition. He works carefully with directors and playwrights to crystallize—that is, to abstract—the play’s ideas, helping them see structural flaws, to discern and shape the production’s tone, and to discover approaches to staging and movement. His designs thus make concrete sound dramaturgy in a manner far exceeding the ornamental and sensational predilections of his peers. His set for Paul Dumol’s *FRANCISCO MANIAGO* (1987, FIG. 10) displays the elegance of his design solutions. The play,

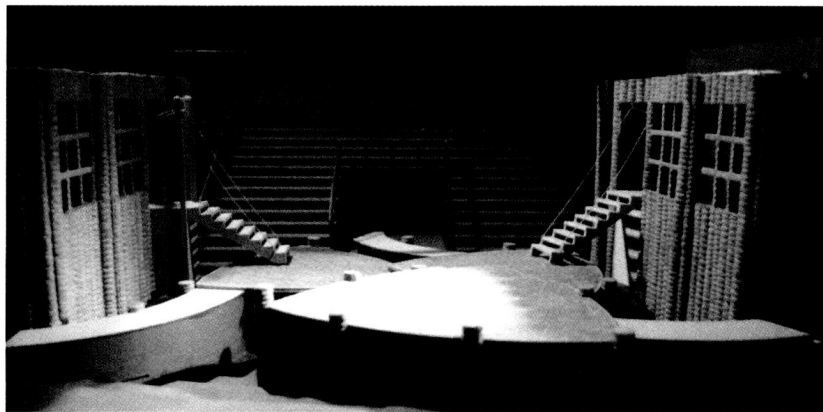


FIG. 10 *FRANCISCO MANIAGO*

(TANGHALANG PILIPINO, DIRECTED BY FELIX PADILLA, 1987)

about an 1645 uprising waged by shipbuilders in the province of Pampanga, plays out upon a space that combines three adjacent sand boxes and two tall wooden forts nested within a proscenium stage. By placing an array of black wooden bleachers on the side of the stage over which the cyclorama typically hangs, he is able to surround the actors with audiences, thus heightening their awareness of each other and of the mechanics of performance. In this regard, the sand boxes not only evoke the idea of the character's immaturity or the sensational but empty visual rhetoric of the failed uprising, they also reflexively emphasize the materiality of the risers and platforms—the physical environment—in which the spectacle of the theater is produced.

The stark yet disarmingly powerful fusion of bold ideas, striking images, and formal precision in his designs makes for spectacular and cerebral theatricality while also paying tribute to poetic roots of drama as sounds, ideas and emotions enfolded, changing in light, moving in time. ☞