Maxie the Musicale: Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros. Written by Nicolas B. Pichay. Directed by Dexter Santos. Bit by Bit Company. PETA Theater, Manila. November 9–December 8, 2013.

It has been said that if you give a Filipino a wall, he will cover every nook and cranny of it with family pictures, school diplomas, vacation souvenirs, religious imagery, and whatever else he could find. Adapted from the award-winning “indie” movie *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* (2005), written by Michiko Yamamoto and directed by Auraeus Solito, Bit by Bit Company’s *Maxie the Musicale* holds true to this well-known Filipino characteristic; it has everything, including the kitchen sink. Given the dominance of Western musicals in our theater scene, this exuberant, if overindulgent, original Filipino production is more than welcome on our stages.

With book and lyrics penned by Nicholas B. Pichay, *Maxie the Musicale* is more or less faithful to the plot of its film predecessor: Maxie (Jayvhot Galang) is a vivacious, warm-hearted, and openly gay pre-teen, the darling of a motherless house of petty thieves. The lone “girl,” he cooks and cleans, while his father, Mang Paco (Roeder Camañag / Nazer Salcedo), helped by his two older brothers, Kuya Boy (Al Gatmaitan / OJ Mariano) and Kuya Bogs (Jay Gonzaga), run an illegal numbers game and trade in stolen goods.

As Fate would have it, Maxie one day runs into trouble with a couple of thugs. He is saved by idealistic new cop Victor Perez (Jojo Riguerra). Despite his family’s misgivings, Maxie befriends him, and his feelings for “Kuya Victor” develop into something more than mere friendship. But there is no way a relationship between a policeman—a devoted one at that—and someone from a family of criminals would ever be smooth sailing.

Shortly after Maxie and Victor meet each other, Kuya Boy botches a hold-up and ends up killing his victim. The investigation of his crime puts a great strain on the relationship between Maxie and Victor, leading eventually to Victor’s rejection of Maxie. When the search for the criminal intensifies under the helm of the new chief of police, Dominguez (Greg de Leon), it is Maxie’s brother Kuya Bogs that is taken into custody instead. Mang Paco decides to take matters into his own hands. He faces off with Dominguez and dies at the hand of a jaded Victor, who shoots him on Dominguez’s orders.

Things can never be the same between Maxie and Victor afterwards. However, instead of being defeated by the loss of a father and the end of his first love, Maxie blossoms into a fabulous young gay man, walking steadfastly into a better future.

There is more to this stage adaptation than meets the eye. While the main storyline is the same, the film's treatment of the situation is completely different from the musical's. *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* is gritty, reserved, and subtle—a detached eye watching events unfold. *Maxie the Musicale*, on the other hand, takes after its name: everything is “maxi,” larger than life. It is an unapologetic rainbow march of grand emotions, raucous laughter, and visual spectacle.

Pichay's lines are snappy and comedic. There are moments of crassness, but it never reaches the point of being off-putting. Aaron Ching, who plays one of Maxie's best friends, Nar, is particularly skilled in walking on this tightrope. His comedic timing is impeccable. None of Sampaloc's characters is also completely black and white; nor does the play fall into the trap of indulging in political discourse or complaining about our social ills. Pichay does not ignore poverty or corruption, but neither does he wallow in them. His lyrics are accessible and have moments that are striking in its message—the final song “Walang Araw na Wala Ka” comes into mind. It is a pity though that the sound mixing between the band and the cast is imbalanced. Oftentimes, the words get drowned out by the music. Thankfully, we are guided visually by a strong hand.

Director and choreographer Dexter Santos established himself in *Orosman at Zafra* as a master of production numbers, and here he does not disappoint. The high octane opening “Gising Gising” is followed by a parade of Santo Niños in bizarre costumes, naked inmates, and policemen taking a shower, a gay beauty contest called “beaucon,” and many more. The stage is often filled with everyone singing and dancing. One could not help but wonder at how the cast sustains its energy until the end of the show.

Some might be concerned—and rightly so—about the extraneous additions to an already solid plot. For example, the beaucon, although highly entertaining, ends with an altercation between another of Maxie's friends, Leslie (Nomer Limatog, Jr.), and his father (a cameo by Neil Tolentino), who cannot accept his gay son. This violent scene is neither followed up nor resolved at the end. Another example is the riot between the members of Sampaloc and the police—the song “Perdido Eden.” If not for the synopsis in the program (or one's prior knowledge of the movie), it could be construed as an eviction protest rather than a massive search and arrest operation.

The resultant confusion is not the only cause for concern; certain emotional punches could have been made stronger with more restraint. But because of the constant bombardment of spectacle we only have a little room left to be moved. Watching it gets exhausting after a while, especially with the three-hour running time. How much shorter—not to mention, tighter—would *Maxie* be if it were trimmed to its essentials?

But it might no longer have the same heart. It is short-sighted to demand *Maxie* to be exactly like *Maximo* given how each medium of storytelling is different and has its own merits. After all, *Maxie the Musicale* is not only the story of Maximo Oliveros. It is also the story of Sampaloc.

Production designer Gino Gonzales's set transports us to the cramped slums of Sampaloc, Manila, with its dilapidated shanties of tin and wood filling the stage. Dull-looking *banderitas* or buntings hang limply from roof to roof, more pathetic than festive. But juxtaposed against this grim image of poverty are the remarkable mundaneness and irrepressible hope of the people of Sampaloc. The entire cast deserves to be highly praised. Rarely do we encounter a company so cohesive and so bonded that they truly do feel like a community. Enhanced by Gonzales's colorful costumes and John Batalla's well-designed lighting, the cast sing and dance their way through the contradictions of their lives: innocence and jadedness, largesse and destitution, joy and sadness. Every number is part of their tale.

Young composers William Santos, JJ Pimpinio, and Janine Santos successfully bring us to Sampaloc by capturing its musical diversity. We are treated to a wide range of genres—from the power ballad to Pinoy rap to '70s raketrol. Through the cast, we get to hear an array of vocal styles—from Galang's nimble pop *birits* or belting to Salcedo's commanding operatic take. That said, although all tuneful and radio friendly, no particular song stands out. It is reminiscent of a night of karaoke—not only in Sampaloc, but all over the Philippines—all songs eventually blend into one, and all that matters is the fun.

The year 2013 has been a memorable year for Filipino musical theatre. We had the re-staging of *Katy!*, a jukebox musical *Sa Wakas*, originals like *Ibalong* and *Lorenzo*, and adaptations like *Sandosenang Sapatos*, *The Bluebird of Happiness*, and *Maxie the Musicale*. It is heartening that amid Western shows like *Wicked*, there is a growing audience eager for our local musical theatre, for musicals that tell our story.

In his notes, Pichay describes the “mythic Sampaloc” as “bearing the fruit of history, memory and imagination that reflects a larger ship of Sampaloc which is carrying us all.” It is worth noting that in a subtle move, Gonzales had clotheslines traverse the audience area, cleverly including us, the audience, into the community.

We are of Sampaloc, too.

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