

INTERVIEW WITH GINO GONZALES

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Salvador F. Bernal (1945–2011) was the foremost set and costume designer in Philippine theater. He graduated from the Ateneo de Manila (AB Philosophy) in 1966 and finished an MFA in Theater Arts in 1972 at the Northwestern University in Evanston. When he returned to the Philippines, he embarked on a career that eventually made him the “Father of Theater Design in the Philippines.” He was the resident production designer of Ballet Philippines and Tanghalang Pilipino, but he was also much sought after by other companies in the Philippines and abroad. From the 1970s until 2011, he designed for some three hundred productions (ballets, operas, films, drama, and concerts) to much critical acclaim.

Bernal is famous for cultivating an aesthetics that suited the conditions of the Third World and a work ethic that advanced the profession of theater design in the country. He remarked: “The designer in the Philippines must be flexible so that he can work in different conditions: some ideal and others limited. The versatility, cleverness, and ingenuity of a designer can save the day for him—when meagre funds for productions became an occasion for inventiveness, wit, and insight.” Bernal made creative use of affordable and often indigenous materials, like *abaca*, *sinamay*, and *katsa*. Paper, plastic, rope, styrofoam—these “lowly” materials become grand set pieces once assembled and lit.

Drawing on his background in literature and philosophy, Bernal eschewed the merely decorative or the pictorial in his works. Instead of a literal representation of a time and place, he usually resorted to metaphor to evoke the theme of a production and metonymy to establish the setting. As Nicanor G. Tiongson, author of *Salvador F. Bernal: Designing the Stage* (2007), recounts, in the making of the sets for *Sa Bunganga ng Pating*, a play about loan sharks preying on poor peasants, Bernal visualized the theme of big fish eating small fry by incorporating the image of fish skeletons into the set “most strikingly, in the architectural details (exterior walls, roof, windows, balustrade) of the *bahay-na-bato*, to show that the loan shark’s two-storey mansion . . . was literally built out of the bones of her indigent victims.”

Last July 19–October 27, 2013, the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) opened the exhibition “Badong: Salvador Bernal Designs the Stage.” Spread over three galleries (Bulwagang Juan Luna, Pasilyo Guillermo Tolentino, and Pasilyo Juan

Luna), the show featured over two hundred items—sketches, costumes, maquettes, videos, images—representing a lifetime’s work. The exhibition was curated by Tiongson and Gino Gonzales, a former student and apprentice of Bernal and himself a renowned designer, with the assistance of Ricardo Cruz.

Following is an interview with Gonzales.

Jonathan Chua: Can you tell us something about your background, especially your connection to Badong [Salvador Bernal]?

Gino Gonzales: Badong was teaching production design at the Ateneo’s Communication Department. I took his class way back in the summer of 1994. There were only about ten students in that class.

JC: You were a Communication major at Ateneo?

GG: Yes, I was. I wanted to go into advertising. That was the in thing back then.

JC: Not theater design?

GG: No.

JC: So how did you get into the class?

GG: Prior to that I had been dabbling in theater, with Tanghalang Ateneo [TA] . . . basically as a backstage person.

JC: And that’s why you took that class?

GG: I heard about it from J.B. Capino and Pauline Suaco, another actress from TA. They were among the first batch that Badong taught. He had left the Ateneo and had gone fulltime at CCP. And then he got estranged from the CCP and went back to Ateneo. That was the first class he taught after years of absence from the Ateneo.

JC: What did you do in that class?

GG: Our final project was a scale model for *Paglipas ng Dilim*, a *sarswela*. Students cringed as he gave them critiques during the final presentation.

JC: By that time, he had already done that production? Did you see it?

GG: We didn’t see the real production. We only saw Badong’s scale model and the video.

JC: What was your model?

GG: I chose act 2. . . . I used the idea of binary oppositions. The stage right represented the Philippines and the stage left represented the USA. It was supposed to be a natural environment—a rural landscape. But everything was half-Eastern and half-Western.

JC: What did Badong say?

GG: He liked it, but he thought it was just too much. I had too many elements and ideas going on. He said it was easier to edit from a flurry of ideas rather than

to extract ideas from a student. The sun on the stage left side had the Statue of Liberty with rays of light. And then on the stage right, there was an image of the *Mater Dolorosa* . . . also with rays. Then there was a *bahay kubo* on stage right and then a cottage with a shingled roof on stage left. There were coconut trees, and there were pine trees. It was super busy, but monochromatic. And then he said that I forgot all about the floor design to tie in the entire thing with. Since then I would always design a floor for a set. Always. Even Shoko [Naomi Matsumoto] mentioned that Filipino designers always fail to design for the floor. It's always an elevation.

JC: And then you went to work with a PR firm? What kinds of products were you selling?

GG: Ivory soap. My first day at work I had to do nine press releases for Ivory.

JC: And why did you leave?

GG: Well, I had a feeling this is not what I wanted to do. On the third day, I asked the boss if I could resign. He said I couldn't. I had to wait for at least two weeks for them to find a replacement and to process everything. So I stayed on for two weeks. I wasn't too happy about the idea of using my creative energy to sell soap. I knew that I could be more useful and productive in a different creative environment.

JC: And what did you do after you left?

GG: I called up Badong. And then he said he was working on a major production and needed help. He said that I could come in as his assistant. I remember he asked me what my salary was. He matched that salary to keep me afloat and interested in design.

JC: And what was the production?

GG: *Alikabok*.

JC: This was the musical of Rachel Alejandro?

GG: Yes. Badong did the costumes. He did not do the sets. Eventually I would work on that production too, still with his clothes and me as set designer, when it was remounted for the nth time at Music Museum.

JC: In which other projects did you work together?

GG: *Maruja*, the film. We also did a couple of projects for International School. *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.

JC: Didn't you have to follow the set and costumes of the original?

GG: No, this was before the internet. We didn't see a single thing.

JC: But didn't you have to get a license to produce this show?

GG: Yes, but you didn't have to follow the clothes. In fact, if you need to follow the clothes you need to pay royalties.

JC: So what was Badong's design for Joseph?

GG: Patchwork. The sets were pretty simple. What Badong did was cut-outs. So all the colors were on the clothes. That was when I realized how good he was at combining history and pop culture. A relevant designer for the theater must be able to straddle the historical and popular. I personally don't like the idea of doing museum pieces, even if I enjoy watching them. On the other hand, I don't think that doing pop design all the way is challenging enough. It's too easy and commonplace. One must be able to fuse both past and present references in a seamless manner. That's where the difficulty in design lies.

JC: The costumes had to be designed for dancing.

GG: Yes. We used *quiana*, a popular polyester from the 60s and 70s.

JC: And Joseph's dreamcoat?

GG: The dreamcoat was made from various strips of fabric. . . . We used maybe about ten to twelve pieces of fabric. It was a pastiche. We couldn't find it in one fabric alone so we had to assemble it. And then he was away in Japan doing *Romeo and Juliet* at that time, so he left me to my own devices. . . . He did very rough sketches, and then I had to come in and redraw everything and fill in the blanks.

JC: What did you do for the Pharaoh?

GG: It was a fusion of Elvis and a Pharaoh costume.

JC: Potiphar's wife?

GG: Egyptian but using a *serpentina* silhouette. . . . The sketches are somewhere in the house.

JC: Which production was most memorable for you?

GG: *Alikabok* was memorable. It was my first professional production. And I got drilled in the *traje de mestiza*. The costumes were both period and contemporary, and they're supposed to be realistic, not stylized. So it was good training. We only had a few stylized clothes . . . he used oilcloth for some characters, which was an idea of Leo Rialp, for the marching band, to make them look kitschy.

JC: And it was the first time you got yelled at by Badong?

GG: It was an issue over a *tapis*. He asked me to put it on one of the actresses. Well, I was "innovating." He yelled at me. I had adjusted it to the length which I thought was proper, but I didn't know there were certain proportions that had to be followed. The thing about Badong is that you should know your place.

JC: You obviously saw him working firsthand.

GG: One of my tasks as assistant was to source for possible swatches for the costumes. My choices were always rejected, and I was wondering why he didn't like them. He later explained that I was judging the fabrics up close and that they wouldn't work as costumes that are seen from a great distance. When Badong goes to the *telahan*, he would have all his initial choices unfurled from their rolls and laid out side by side. He would then hobble about fifteen feet away, tilt his head and

squint his eyes. On some occasions, he would drape the fabric on Marietta, his girl Friday, to see how it falls on the body. Only then would he make his final decision. Sometimes the choice of fabrics would seem so wrong and so tacky. But when they are built as costumes and situated onstage, they would suddenly make so much sense.

JC: Let's talk about Badong's creative process. Can you give an account of it as you saw it unfolding?

GG: Badong liked to be obsessed with an idea. He had a natural hunger for information and a desire to understand something before beginning the actual design process.

JC: He seemed to like working around an image. Like the fish in *Bunganga ng Pating*.

GG: Like poetry.

JC: Was Ang Kiukok the inspiration?

GG: Yes, Kiukok fishes.

JC: He was collecting Kiukok even then?

GG: Yes, even way, way before. Before anyone got obsessed with Kiukok's works. For *Bunganga ng Pating* . . . Didn't he used to eat fish, the *dapa* [sole]? Usually that's what he gets served, fish from Nepa Q Mart. He had the flesh removed after the fish was fried by the maid so he could study the skeleton; the bone structure.

JC: And then that became the motif of the production?

GG: Then, I saw he made these ugly, rough sketches of the set, which were given to Junior Galvero for initial drafts—Junior was the trusted renderer and scale model builder—which Badong would constantly correct and re-proportion. Junior lost the rough sketch. It was super rough. But when the set was finally done, it was fabulous!

JC: The costumes have fish imagery, too.

GG: For the longest time, when we would go to Divisoria or Uniwide Sales in Cubao, we would look for fish prints or "under the sea" motifs. Even for the western clothes . . . he used gaudets, or inserts, that simulated fish tails. Very subtle . . . very Badong. If you don't explain it . . .

JC: But if you miss it, it's okay.

GG: You can miss it. It's smart, isn't it?

JC: How did Gino Gonzales work with Salvador F. Bernal? Or how much of Gino is in a Bernal show? And vice versa?

GG: Oh, Badong's work was 100 percent Badong . . . realized by skilled artisans. I merely made proposals and minor choices. Marietta and I would really just fill in the blanks. Badong always laid out the template and parameters, and we

would just work within those guidelines. It would have been presumptuous of us to deviate. And besides, what's the point in infuriating him?

JC: What would you say was the most educational aspect of having worked with Badong?

GG: A difficult question! Too many to enumerate. I wouldn't know where to begin.

JC: Let's talk about the exhibition. Whose idea was it to have an exhibit?

GG: CCP. Chris Millado [Artistic Director of the CCP] and Tess Rances [Teresa Rances, Manager, Administrative Services, CCP].

JC: What kind of work did you have to do?

GG: At first, I was just the designer for the exhibit and Nic was the curator. Eventually, my territory expanded. . . . Actually, it was a team effort between Boots Herrera [Division Chief, Visual Arts and Museum Division, CCP], Eric Cruz [Ricardo Cruz], a student of Badong's, and Nic and me. I designed the layout and the displays. The specifics, like the graphics and text panels, were done by B+C Design, a graphic design company. Nic wrote the text. And we all chose the objects together.

JC: What was the idea behind dividing the exhibition into space, symbol, surface, sources, and silhouettes?

GG: There are three sections: the timeline [on Pasilyo Guillermo Tolentino], and then the studies [on Pasilyo Juan Luna], and inside [Bulwagang Juan Luna] are the finished works—the clothes, final scale models, and photos of the actual productions. Nic used the framework of the book [*Salvador F. Bernal: Designing the Stage*] to serve as a guide for the exhibit inside. The five Ss—symbol, sources, surfaces, space, and silhouettes—are facets of Badong's designs. And the Ss are also for "Salvador." It was B+C that proposed that. They wanted single words to capture what the sections stood for.

JC: So "symbol" is the visual interpretation of a production, "sources" are sources, "surfaces" are the materials, "spaces" are the theater spaces, and "silhouettes" are for the costumes.

GG: It's a graphic thing. It's a very visually propelled exhibit, isn't it? They wanted catch phrases. Nic had a very academic approach to it, so the titles were kind of long. They had to shorten it to give it some snap.

JC: There's a hologram, too.

GG: For *Engkantada*.

JC: A woman dancing . . .

GG: Very simple technology. We had to shoot a dancer from Ballet Philippines, and it was projected onto a black scrim. We had to do it in scale.

JC: Badong would have admired that. . . . Who chose the materials?

GG: Nic and I. Eric Cruz helped us select.

JC: What was the basis?

GG: First, availability. Then, relevance. Third, it had to fit in the framework. We went back to the resident companies to ask what materials they still had—Tanghalang Pilipino, Ballet Philippines, Philippine Ballet Theater. We called up the producers of the shows he designed for—Dimitri [Productions] for *Lapu-Lapu* . . . Tanghalang Ateneo. But it was tragic because not a lot of the clothes have survived, especially for productions like *Manila, Manila*. . . . So we were working with extant pieces. We didn't want to invent. We would remember how they were done, but we didn't want to create new pieces. Even Tanghalang Pilipino's *Tibag*—they're all gone. They got wet in the flood and deteriorated. Even Ballet Philippines . . . because they would alter costumes for other productions. There are very few extant clothes of Badong that are still with Tanghalang Pilipino now.

JC: This exhibition will tour, correct?

GG: It's going to start touring in 2014. Definitely to Dagupan. We're looking at Bulacan and one venue in Visayas and one venue in Mindanao.

JC: You've been in this business for some time now. Have things changed significantly since 1994? It's been almost twenty years.

GG: Well, it's now considered a decent profession. Before it wasn't even considered a profession; it was a hobby. And producers practically expected you to do it for free.

JC: Can you live on the income of a theater designer?

GG: Production design for theater? It's not comfortable to live on production design on theater alone. So you have to do other things to supplement that. That's what I asked Badong before: "Can I survive on this?" That's why he introduced me to Toto [Eduardo Sicangco] and Winky [Roberto Maramba] and his other students who were doing very well designing, but designing for other things, too.

JC: Which you also do.

GG: Industrial design . . . for example, like doing Christmas decorations for malls. Doing product launches. Doing TV work.

JC: Ah, yes. You did that show on GMA . . .

GG: *Amaya*. You can live comfortably if you pool together these things.

JC: Are there enough theater companies now to make theater design viable?

GG: There's a demand, would you believe, for set designers and costume designers? . . . Let me put that in perspective. There's a demand for *reliable* set and costume designers. When they ask for recommendations, we're at a loss as to who to recommend because everyone's either busy or you have people who are capable of designing but not capable of organizing themselves. But it's a growing thing.

There are three schools now that teach design: College of St. Benilde, Ateneo de Manila, and UP [University of the Philippines].

JC: Ateneo?

GG: I mean, we teach design for the theater. But there's only one school that has a course—College of St. Benilde.

JC: Ateneo offers a BFA in Theater Arts. Design is just a minor . . .

GG: But you know, I realize there's a lot of kids with potential, but like everyone else they are afraid of going into it because of the financial situation. Their parents want to see Ateneo as an investment.

JC: Of course. They spend so much a semester.

GG: And they don't warm up to the idea of their sons or daughters going into theater.

JC: But they can go to interior design.

GG: Yes, along with it, if they're smart, but it's also a matter of building confidence. They would rather go into a multinational company afterwards.

JC: So there is training, but is there an emerging design aesthetic in theater?

GG: In this country? It's very varied.

JC: What would you say is the influence of Badong in theater design?

GG: In terms of style? . . . If there is, I can't detect it, because I look at designers as individuals. I can trace a pattern if you give me a name of a designer. But if we're talking about a good influence from Badong, maybe it's that generally color palettes are tight. . . . There's still a lack of discipline among designers.

JC: What I notice now is that there seems to be a trend of using LEDs now. Would Badong have approved?

GG: I don't think so.

JC: It literalizes . . .

GG: To begin with, they're still unable to make the LED a natural part of the environment. It's like a TV on stage. They haven't reached a point, at least here in the country—I've seen it abroad done very successfully, where it's organic to the environment, but here it's still a TV. . . . It's a separate entity. It glares. You look at it instead of the actors, and it doesn't match the set pieces.

JC: Have you seen a local production where there's a good use of the LED?

GG: I haven't seen one yet, not for theater. Projections sometimes.

JC: That's different from the use of LEDs.

GG: Projections are usually on the surface.

JC: I've seen TA use projections often.

GG: Dulaang UP does it. But I haven't seen very organic projections, even at Ballet Philippines. I've seen some dance pieces, for example, in Singapore, a French company where moving images that are projected on the body and on the set

pieces, but they're so well synchronized with the music and the movement. It's part of the performance.

JC: So is it a technical problem?

GG: No, it's a creative problem. They don't know how to control the technology. They allow the technology to take over the production . . . This is how I see it. Producers and directors tend to be insecure, and they feel they need these technological advances to back them up. It's as if they feel that there's a greater rate of success when you have this behind you. In fact, it takes away from it. That's just my opinion. . . . But you know, sometimes people like it. They like the razzle-dazzle.

JC: What are some of your new productions?

GG: Just finishing their runs were *Maxie The Musical* and *Pepe's Secret Christmas*. Upcoming are costumes for *Mahabharata* and *Antigone* for TA.

JC: By Sophocles?

GG: By Floy Quintos. A fusion of *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex*.

JC: Did you also do the *Oresteia* [of TA]?

GG: I was a consultant for *Ang Oresteyas*. So the students designed that. . . . I've been telling people in the academe that it's not good for professionals to keep coming in all the time to design for school productions because it doesn't create a space for new designers to emerge. The reason why I was able to design was that there was nobody doing it at Tanghalang Ateneo back then. There was a void that had to be filled in. Nowadays it's only professionals who do the designs. . . . There's an enormous age gap between my generation of designers and the new one.

JC: Do you see any promising designers from among the students today?

GG: Well, I can identify at least five from Ateneo who have potential. But like I said, the theater companies have to give them work. They have to give them a chance to design. And they all need guidance from a mentor.

Gino Gonzales is a designer for stage and screen. Under a Fullbright scholarship, he finished a degree in scenography at New York University. He teaches production design at the Ateneo de Manila University. He may be sent an e-mail at gonzales3n@yahoo.com.