

# THE MUSIC OF EDRU ABRAHAM

## An Openness in *Sintang Dalisay*

U pon hearing of *Sintang Dalisay* staged by the Tanghalang Ateneo, Edrú Abraham met with director Ricardo Abad to pitch the prospect of turning the material into total theater. For some time, Abraham had been entertaining the idea of intersectional arts, which was new and perhaps even unheard of in modern Philippine drama. Instead of dividing exclusive functions among the cast and crew, the entire ensemble takes on various roles throughout a production, entailing the actors themselves to play the instruments. Each member is freed from the constraints of specific and specialized performances within the play, seamlessly presenting a repertoire of various talents on stage. One can only imagine the demands of versatility such a display of talents entails, but Abraham believes in the Filipino capacity to surprise even himself in leaps and bounds. His faith in the Filipino is something that he has learned from his mentor, national artist Leonor Orosa-Goquingco. In the interview with *PAHA*, he recalled an aphorism in English by her, “Bigyan mo ang Pilipino ng kalahating pagkakataon at gugulatin niya ang sarili at mundo sa kanyang dakilang magagawa” (“Give the Filipino half a chance and he will surprise himself and the world for

what he can accomplish”). The seed of total theater, however, would not come into fruition until the year 2011, when he formally joined the team of *Sintang Dalisay* as music director and sound designer.

From the get-go, Abad’s project itself was innovative—a medieval text by one of the most recognizably European writers, translated into Tagalog at the dawn of the Philippine nation, supplemented with translations by Rolando Tinio, and set in the Muslim south. Abraham held no hesitation about training the actors to play indigenous instruments, the same way that they trained on the dance *igal* for a week with masters from Tawi-Tawi, as it was his ardent mission to promote a sense of what precolonial music might have been, transposed from a revered, dead past into a living tradition. For Abraham, the past does not close itself off, but one has to pay it close attention in order to reap its richness. Total theater, for example, has been around in the indigenous communities and was even the mode of theater in neighboring cultures, such as the Beijing opera. Our modern plays, perhaps by dint of habit and practicality, have relied on individualized roles for the troupe, with each member being delegated with a particular task in a production. As in all innovations, the transition to total theater underwent trials and errors, which constituted keeping and developing aspects of the production that worked, and dropping those that burdened the play’s delivery of its intended effect. Believing in “sentido klasiko,” he rejects excess and whittles away unnecessary details to arrive at the heart of what truly matters. “Anong yaman, anong tama, ’yon na ’yon,” he said, suggesting the power of creative instinct in his process. “Gagawin ang kailangan upang maging matagumpay ang eksena.” The play premiered with a cast of thirty; in the last production, in Penang, Malaysia, Tanghalang Ateneo presented with about a dozen performers.

Abraham attributes the success of *Sintang Dalisay* to the troupe’s practice of what can be called in Filipino as “bigayan,”

the conscientious contribution of and openness to opinions that mark a healthy collaboration. Everyone, including students and understudies, had a say for the improvement of the piece, informed by a general feeling of trust in one another. He knew well enough when to point out a flaw and when to respect the decisions of Abad or the choreographer Matthew Santamaria. Although his turf was music, Abraham had also changed certain facets of the dance, because the two are inextricably intertwined.

“Music is dance heard,” he said, “even as dance is music seen,” emphasizing not only the temporal nature of both forms, which imprint themselves on the medium of air, but also their synesthetic force on the audience. The rhythmic combination of the two—for what is rhythm if not sound spread out in patterns across time—builds to an effect that enriches the scenes. For example, the music slows down toward the end of “Sayaw ng mga Bituin,” the play’s fourth act, to stretch out and enact, to a certain extent, the realization of romance between the two principal characters.

Embarking on the project, Abraham would undoubtedly use indigenous instruments, employing an array that comes from different cultures across the archipelago. He used the agung and kubing from the ethnolinguistic groups in Mindanao, the gangsa and patangguk from the Cordilleras, and the kuribaw of the Ibanag, in Cagayan. He also went beyond the nation and adapted the gamelan, an orchestra type of music from Indonesia. And he added to this mix what probably was the most viscerally intimate of the twenty or so instruments in the ensemble: the human voice. All these compose the sonic landscape of the play, serving as background, as commentator of the action, and as continuity of the scenes, capable of externalizing emotions of the characters and surrounding the audience with an immediate and immersive experience. With an austere set, his music builds the world of Rashiddin and Jamila.

Yet *Sintang Dalisay* was a world in flux. Each performance differed from the last, not only because of theater's dependence on time but also because Abraham allowed space for improvisations. Present almost every night to supplement music on the stage, he played with the Kontemporaryong Gamelan Pilipino (Kontra-GaPi), his homegrown troupe of gamelan instrumentalists named after the iconic Indonesian ensemble. Gamelan has gained international currency to denote Southeast Asian music that uses the same set of instruments such as the gongs and xylophones. As core musicians of the play, Kontra-GaPi consists of students from the University of the Philippines, Diliman, where Abraham is professor of Art Studies. To improvise well, he said, the students needed confidence and knowledge about all the instruments. He encouraged them to swap places in the ensemble, and their versatility showed best in the freedom to experiment and make their voices heard, so to speak.

The play's openness to change ensured its spot in the tradition of our national theater, as it could also be staged elsewhere in the archipelago, perhaps in modified form according to the local culture of the community, without fear of losing its essence as a Filipinized play that drew "richly and mainly from southern traditions with the enrichment of other traditions." Abraham reiterated that he staked no claim to authenticity and faithful renditions of original sounds. Instead, his style was contemporary, a *mélange* of different kinds of music inspired by our rich indigenous cultures.

In light of postcolonial theory and the discourse of representation, however, the practice might draw accusations of cultural appropriation. There prowls the danger of speaking for minoritized subjects that have long been silenced through centuries of colonialism. For him, the discussion all comes down to intention. Being truthful and honest about the work should keep the artist from exploiting other cultures. "We are Filipinos," he said. "Our self-identification includes all Philippine indigenous cultures. I recognize

each of their contributions, and, at the same time, identify them as part of myself as Filipino. This is an overarching and inclusive point of view that acknowledges the contributions to the national culture of all the Filipino ethnolinguistic groups.” As Ibanag, from Cagayan, he is generous with his own heritage, recognizing the value of getting inspired by other communities and asserting that “other ethnolinguistic groups can borrow from one another as long as they enrich [the culture].” He furthered, “The music is intended to be shared by everyone. How else will you enrich Philippine culture?” His receptiveness to other ideas and repudiation of gatekeeping offer us a glimpse into his sense of nation, one that is never static and insular. Going against the trappings of essentialism, he celebrates origins but interrogates notions of originality. Philippine identity, like the play, is a hybrid of influences, both Western and indigenous, but rooted in the living traditions of our precolonial past. It is a project open to improvisations akin to the daring of musicians working toward a better sound. Asked if he still entertained the idea of changing anything about *Sintang Dalisay*, two years after its last curtain call, Abraham said, “All the time.”

JULIAN DELA CERNA

University of the Philippines, Diliman, and Ateneo de Manila University  
 juliandelacerna@gmail.com

Julian dela Cerna is studying for his MA in Araling Pilipino (Philippine Studies) at the University of the Philippines, Diliman.

