

## FORUM KRITIKA: PHILIPPINE THEATER AND MARTIAL LAW (PART 2)

### ABOUT THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Parallel with the colloquium “Radical Theatre and Ireland” held at Liverpool Hope University is a Kritika Kultura Lecture Series “Teatro Testimonio: Poetics and Politics of Performance in the Philippines Under Martial Law” held at the Ateneo de Manila University. As with the papers from the colloquium in Ireland, the lectures in “Teatro Testimonio” are published in installments in two consecutive issues of *Kritika Kultura*. This issue features two more articles from the “cultural workers” of the period.

### THE AESTHETICS OF POVERTY: A RATIONALE IN DESIGNING FOR PHILIPPINE PEOPLE’S THEATER 1973-1986

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#### Abstract

This article will discuss the production design approaches and techniques used in plays by the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) from 1973-1986, using the principles of “aesthetics of poverty.” The “aesthetics of poverty” came about in consideration of the poverty situation of the Philippines and is really an attitude more than anything else, appropriate for the social conditions of Philippine society. This was also the period when there was very limited budget for productions, the result of which was creating with one’s imagination and clear imaging for meanings and symbolic representation.

#### Keywords

educational theater, national theater, stage design

#### About the author

Professor Emeritus of the Department of Art Studies, College of Arts and Letters, University of the Philippines, Brenda Fajardo is now retired from teaching and is working as Curriculum Director at the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA), School of People’s Theater. Joining PETA in the early 70s, she used to design for PETA productions at the Dulaang Raha Sulayman. She acted and directed in PETA during the 80s and was quite active as part of its educational unit. She articulated the “aesthetics of poverty” as a result of her production experience during the martial law.

In its pioneering phase, the founder of the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) envisioned a Philippine national theater. During the 50s and 60s, theater in the Philippines was either traditional, in relation to the Catholic calendar, or

school-based, which meant plays in English. The articulated vision for PETA was to develop a national theater with original plays and in the national language. PETA was defined by the changing economic, political, social, and cultural realities, and by the 1970s through the 1980s this national consciousness was heightened to include a growing nationalist sentiment (Samson et al. 17-28).

PETA has its repertory company, the Kalinangan Ensemble, and it also has an educational unit now referred to as School of People's Theater. In the 1970s, its artists went to various communities to give theater workshops that helped build a national theater movement, converging in two MAKIISA festivals, held at Raha Sulayman and later the Christ the King Seminary Compound in Quezon City, where theater productions came from all over the nation. Thus, during the martial law years, theater became a potent vehicle for political expression. This was further inspired by two significant theorizing moves: the adoption of Nicanor G. Tiongson's *Repleksiyon ng Pangangailangan ng Nakararami* (RPN) and the development of the orientation-artistry-organization framework (OAO) as criteria for planning and evaluation of PETA's performance as a theater company (Samson et al. 29-46).

PETA has always considered developing a people's theater aesthetics. Following the OAO framework, it articulated in 1983 the following goals:

- Orientational

PETA strives to raise the level of national and social consciousness among its artists and members as well as among the audience or public.

- Artistic

It devotes itself to (1) the growth of a Filipino- and people-based theater aesthetics as well as to experimentation and subsequent development of theater forms and styles inspired by Filipino and Asian theater tradition and materials; and (2) the training and honing of the artistic and technical skills and talents of drama artists in various aspects of theater arts and stage production, including educational theater and research.

- Organizational

It initiates and supports the establishment of theater groups in schools, communities, and institutions that, like itself, shall be committed to the promotion of a national culture. (Samson et al. 135)

In the 1970s, many of its productions were exploratory in nature. There were original plays, adaptations, and a series of absurd plays. Although it was primarily conscious of developing Filipino plays, it did not forget to include classic works in each theater season. By the 80s, it became even more conscious of the plays to produce whether original or adaptations and always relevant to current socio-political conditions.

### THE AESTHETICS OF POVERTY

PETA is known for its commitment to the development of a people's theater that mirrors Philippine social realities—a people's theater for empowerment, a potent agent toward personal and societal transformation. Thus, PETA has used its creative ability to survive in spite of its perennial poverty.

The Philippines is a poor country. This is a reality from which we Filipinos should not escape, if only because its acceptance is the first step to survival. Then and now, conditions have not changed. In the late 70s, the concept of "aesthetics of poverty" came about, articulated by PETA in its scenic designs and became a working philosophy. This practice was adopted by PETA long before it was labeled as such. It was a result of long years of creating forms for theater under conditions of poverty, inside and outside the company.

Aesthetics of poverty implies that there is a sense of beauty which belongs to people who live in a condition of material deprivation. There are concepts of color, line, space, texture, rhythm, and movement that are conditioned by particular natural, cultural, and social environments. It results from a particular quality of life that is conditioned by its reality. Cutting down the expenses, however, was not the main point. It was the new way of seeing the actualities of life—the various shades and combinations of colors that are seen daily in heaps of garbage and forms of attrition; the various tones of browns and grays seen in the skin of sunburned people, the broken down houses, and the shanties; the patches of color that peep out of once polychromed jeepnies—revealing a world heretofore unknown. Colors and textures of found objects that reflected these realities were used for the sets; symbolic representations in the costumes, props, and the like were carefully chosen for its meaning. The approach not only expressed the truth, it also provided authentic aesthetic experience not only for its viewers but also for the creating artists. It was possible to capture the patina of time and become more sensitive to the aesthetic qualities of local materials thereby increasing our powers of expression.

Mistakes have been committed time and again. Some productions have costly designs despite limited budgets. In the past, these mistakes have caused our designers and directors to reexamine their work in relation to the vision for a Philippine theater. How can an artist claim to be socially responsible when he mounts high-cost productions during times of deprivation?

A direct result of this questioning during those years became an unspoken company policy: to produce designs on as low a budget as possible, using the least expensive and readily available materials. This economic limitation, in turn, proved to be of vital importance to the evolution of the company's "aesthetics of poverty." Design concepts were discussed and adjusted to financial limitations so that the PETA designer of those times gradually became realistic and practical, always setting one eye on the limited budget.

Ironically, although not totally unexpected, the limitations brought out the resourcefulness and creativity among the design practitioners in finding solutions to problems. There were endless possibilities of working with commonly-used and inexpensive materials. These were explored, producing works that have been both economical and aesthetic.

## SPACE

The aesthetics of poverty was practiced when PETA staged its productions at the Dulaang Raha Sulayman at Fort Santiago, Intramuros. For almost four decades, the Dulaang Raha Sulayman was PETA's theater space during the dry season, moving to indoor spaces during the wet season. It is an open theater and three dimensional, with heavy stone and brick-inlaid walls seen from all sides of the space. By itself, it provided an atmosphere that was grounded in history.

In 2005, PETA built a theater center which houses an indoor theater space, the PHINMA Hall. The design concepts have differed because of the nature of the space. But PETA directors, who have been so used to the Raha Sulayman space, still conceive plays in a three dimensional manner, no matter its planar orientation.

## DESIGNING FOR PETA

During the martial law years, PETA had a pool system according to certain aspects of theater work. There was a writers' pool, a music pool, a technical pool, and a design

pool, etc. It meant working collectively so that its members can contribute ideas to the production concept. A team of designers were selected for a particular production and together they worked on scenic design, costumes, props, and so on. There was always a lead designer who put the ideas together and supervised the work.

Being fundamentally a people's theater, its members had varying degrees of artistic training and capability. Some had academic training but most were non-professionals equipped only with natural talent and an inclination for the theater arts. Thus, the pool system worked with each member contributing individual strengths to the pool's work. In the process, they learned from each other.

Preparation included research and understanding the premise of the play, as well as the writer's and director's intent. These helped the designers to conceptualize and integrate their own ideas and translate it into visual terms.

Design concepts and forms are evoked and emerge from the basic structure of the play, the theater space, the concept and style of the director. There is a great advantage when everyone in the production staff knows the play and the director's staging concept. Designing become challenging and urgent but easier.

The design team starts by reading and analyzing the script. Images from the script are collected and thought about. Then, each one is asked to work on the images. The group meets often to share individual ideas. Some ideas are rejected, others selected. Selected ideas are discussed and worked on to generate more concepts which are then presented to the director. After a concept is formed, smaller teams are formed to work on the details of the design. The group finalizes the concept and synchronizes the different aspects of design. Though seemingly laborious and circuitous, this process has actually strengthened the working relationship and the internalization of the principles of the aesthetics of poverty.

## APPROACHES TO DESIGN

The experience of designing collectively has led to different types of theater designs. This, along with the exploration of cultural forms in search of a distinctively Filipino form, has resulted in what is seen as a "PETA style."

This paper will focus on the visual aspects of theater, manifested in PETA productions from early 1970s to 1986. It is in the visual medium that the concept of "aesthetics of poverty" is largely explored. As a working philosophy it was adopted by PETA during those periods when finances were scarce and production processes were not

as complex. The following examples will give an idea how the design was approached in the various plays of the period.

### ACCORDING TO THE DIRECTOR'S TECHNIQUE AND SPECIFICATIONS

The director who uses a workshop technique in mounting a production often uses improvisation. The actors become active participants in the creative process and have a direct hand in evolving the play's form. Improvisation would include costuming and props making. Everyone looks for and uses ready made or found objects, using them to create new images. The role of both the director and the designer is that of aesthetic coordinators, monitoring the totality of the work wherein every member of the cast and crew contributed their individual creativity. This approach needed careful handling, for it is easy to find junk but difficult to create art from junk. Sensitivity, selectivity, and discrimination are necessary and the assigned lead designer provides the necessary guidance.

There are problems encountered in the use of this approach. Sometimes a director tells the designer that ten acting areas are needed. Since the budget is limited, a solution is to use portable space modules. Such modules could be placed within the staging area. Since the Raha Sulayman theater was amidst ruins, there were many possibilities for creative staging, as in the case of *Bayaning Huwad/Fake Hero* (1967) and *Joe Hill* (1979) where the fort's window arches, ramparts, adjacent chamber areas, ladders, etc., were utilized. Sometimes an acting area is constructed but the director decides to remove it because of limitations of the lighting equipment or lack of coordination between the set-designer and the light-designer. Thus both designers need to consult the director along the way to avoid unnecessary expense. A thorough study of the area, establishing certain acting spaces and levels before implementing the design, is important.

### USE OF BACKDROPS IN CAPTURING THE ESSENCE OF THE PLAY

Scenic paintings (backdrops) have been used to establish setting. In *Kabesang Tales/ Chieftain Tales* (1975), the painted backdrops were utilized not to establish particular scenes but to create a sense of history, functioning as "historical backdrops." Carefully selected photographs and documents of the period were enlarged into sepia murals that provided a patina of history. These enlarged historical documents in the form of faded sepia murals combined with costumes of muted colors and spare props resulted in a total design of a three-dimensional historical document, likened to a life-size diorama.

Three-dimensional backdrops were used for Brechtian plays *Ang Hatol ng Guhit na Bilog/Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1977), and *Ang Buhay ni Galileo/Galileo Galilee* (1980). The backdrops were an assemblage of actual materials. For the former, forms of attrition such as tarnished metal sheets, old rubber tires, and found pieces of lumber provided the textural qualities that complimented the play as a whole. For the latter, images exploring the role of the scientist in the advancement or destruction of life was created. Recalled images from the works of Leonardo Da Vinci, Francisco Goya, a news photo from *Time* magazine, and quotations taken from the text of the play were juxtaposed like fragments of news and images, of thoughts and feelings, echoing the questions and anxieties posed by the play, presenting a visual stream of consciousness.

### THE USE OF COMMON MATERIALS IN CAPTURING THE ESSENCE OF FORM

It was in working with PETA's guest director and mentor Fritz Bennewitz who directed *Hatol, Galileo, and Macbeth* (1984) that designing for PETA became more meaningful and challenging. It was while working with him that PETA developed a particular scenic style and helped me articulate the principles of aesthetics of poverty.

Bennewitz introduced a working method and attitude that recognized the individual concept of the designer while integrating the director's own ideas, thus establishing the importance of strong rapport and working relationship between the director and designer as the play is conceptualized together. The approach underscores the importance of the two artists listening to each other in collaboration to bring out significant ideas and meanings.

In *Galileo*, Bennewitz mulled over the condition of limited budget and problems of costuming. It was not necessary for costumes to be historically authentic, he proposed. After some brainstorming, Bennewitz and the designer came up with the use of yards of cloth stained in inexpensive cloth dye to render hue and tinge of antiquity to the material. These clothing material were solicited from steam laundries. As a result, the costumes had the look of being oxidized and the patina provided visual unity to the forms. The actors wearing the robes of stained cloth looked sculptural on stage. Colors symbolized the characters they were playing. The monks wore white, the Cardinals had a grayish pink to bloodstained red, the Duke in royal yellow, the little monk in humble gray, and so on. The colors established social class and character. Designing for plays by Brecht taught us the art of improvising, using found materials.

Similar techniques and style were further explored in PETA's production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The problem was to project the setting of the play without making



it alien to our own experience. Natural materials such as hemp rope, burlap, and oxidized metal were used. Black and dull brown was the dominant color scheme. The design of the set adapted to PETA's theater space. Contemporary images of barbed wire and searchlights were incorporated without clashing, precisely because the concept was timeless. It was a matter of balancing the prescribed setting, the economic constraints, the use of what is familiar—all in an effort to produce an authentic work that would not in any way be anachronistic. The resulting creation was aesthetic without being opulent.

The design entered into the spirit of the play and showed royalty without having to put on the extravagance of kings. Indeed, with Bennewitz, the aesthetics of poverty was explored to the fullest.

### THE USE OF INDIGENOUS MATERIALS AND FORMS

Forms or symbolic usage of visual elements such as color or shape is part of the collective unconscious and their use in revitalized forms is important in the vision of a national culture. Where possible, therefore, the PETA designer was urged to draw ideas from folk life and culture. Some productions lent themselves easy to folk forms and materials.

The use of indigenous materials in contemporary plays resulted in a culture-based aesthetic. Some examples are the following:

- *Junto al Pasig* (1973) wherein the folk toy *taka* (papier mache animals) were used as hand props, carried overhead by body movers much like the Japanese *bunraku*.
- *Hobe/Job* (1974) used the *parol* (Christmas paper lantern) as the source of form-idea for the giant puppet heads that represented Good and Evil. A sun-face was used as the symbol for Good, radiating its benevolent energy on the people, while a monstrous face in red and silver metallic paper projected Evil. As in the traditional lantern, bamboo, *papel de japon* (Japanese colored tissue paper), and local metallic paper were used.
- Bamboo was again used as the set for both *Si Tatang Atbp. Mga Tauhan Ng Atang Dula/Tatang and Other Characters in our Play* (1975) and *Langit-Langitang Kumunoy/ Heavenly Whirlpool* (1978). The set made out of bamboo was actually both backdrop and set props for the actors, taking its cue from Asian theater. Aside



from bamboo, inexpensive *katsa* (cheesecloth) was used as costume material for both plays.



*Hobe* (1974), parol motif



*Si Tatang Atbp. Mga Tauhan ng Aming Dula* (1975), use of bamboo and katsa

- *Dupluhang Bayan/Country Debate* (1975) juxtaposed the traditional *duplo* (debate) and the *alamat* (legend) using folk elements to express contemporary sentiments. A highly visual play, it combined shadows/silhouettes, color, light, and bodies moving in space. Sounds were produced from non-traditional materials such as shells, stones, crackling paper, and traditional ethnic musical instruments.



*Dupluhang Bayan* (1975), shadow play

- In *Ang Hatol Na Guhit Na Bilog* (1974) suggestive costuming and props that crossed sub-cultures were used. In this play, a piece of *banig* (sleeping mat) and a *duyan* (bamboo hammock), commonly used by poor families, marked the setting for the scene in an old couple's hut. Their use immediately established the presence of a child and the social status of the old couple, proving that a single visual idea could explain more than a paragraph. Similarly, the use of the *malong* (tube cloth) as costume sets the play somewhere in Southeast Asia or in Muslim Philippines without pinpointing any specific ethnic group.

Designers must take the precaution in the use of cultural forms as symbols. Where the form is non-verbal, there is always the possibility that the audience might find it too



*Ang Hatol ng Guhit na Bilog (1974), use of indigenous materials*

abstract, especially if they are used to seeing realistic sets and props. When this happens, it is possible that the artist has failed to select the most appropriate visual symbol for the particular meaning it was intended. Therefore, it is important for the designer to capture the meaning and select the appropriate combination of elements in order to maximize the use of cultural forms and still be understood. This careful selection of items for its symbolic representation is capturing the gestalt that everyone can understand.

### TAKING THE CUE FROM LIFE ITSELF

Genre plays are like period plays. An atmosphere that belongs to a particular period of time or that of a particular setting is captured. The main requirements for designing such productions are the heart and mind of a highly sensitive artist and internalization of needs and realities. Research is important for this type of design to provide authenticity.

Many themes of PETA plays are about the poor. And so, the costumes and props need not be expensive at all. Props need only to approximate the actual without being naturalistic. One only has to project its essence. If the scene requires a cake, for example, it is not necessary to bake the actual cake each time. Such a task would be an economic and aesthetic fault which comes from a lack of understanding about theater work.



In *Juan Tambo* (1979), it was necessary to capture the ambience of the urban poor environment and use lines, color, texture, and rhythmic patterns that express the pulse of life in the slums. To accomplish this, sense-data was observed and gathered through actual visits and immersion in various urban poor communities. This was not difficult as we were working closely with communities, the urban poor included. It was important to capture the essential elements that would project the life of the community—the congestion, squalor, mire, and despair. For this particular production, color was carefully selected for social class representation. The poor were designated earth brown (terracotta) since they are closer to the earth and it is regarded as the color of attrition.

To represent images of squalor, tarnished galvanized iron sheets, plywood that was peeling off, discarded rubber tires, metal scraps, plastic pails, etc., were used since they were objects actually used and seen in slum areas. Other than for artistic reasons, props were chosen to express social conditions and problems. For instance, empty plastic pails lined up in rows indicated the lack of water supply as people waited for their turn to get water from one source, which happens in many urban poor communities.

Still in *Juan Tambo*, the scenic design showed the interrelation of static space and dynamic motifs placed within the space: canned goods, plastic toys in *sari-sari* stores, the ubiquitous clotheslines, plants in tarnished fruit juice cans, comic books for rent, plastic curtains, so on and so forth. These provided the visual rhythm and texture that powerfully expressed the life pulse of the people.



In *Juan Tambo* (1979), scraps and found objects were used for the set as backdrop, with props giving the texture of the scene





*Panunuluyan* (1979), costumes

During the same year, PETA mounted *Ang Panunuluyan ng Birheng Maria at San Jose sa Cubao, Ayala, Plaza Miranda atbp sa loob at labas ng Metro* (1979) which was a take off from the traditional Christmas street play, the *Maytinis*. This reenacts the flight to Egypt of Joseph and Mary but this time, the couple went to strategic places in Metro Manila to give comment on the social apathy of the people. Being a simulated street play, it had minimal sets, using the various stage areas of the Raha Sulayman Theater. The theater space itself was optimized as the setting of the play.

In *Mapait sa Bao/Bitter in Shell* (1980), a minimalist approach provided the setting. Included in this design were coconut palm leaves, hung as a wall; bamboos to outline a wall and window, and minimal furniture such as a *banggera* (dish rack) and the *dulang* (low table for dining). This successfully reflected the interior of a rural nipa hut found in the provinces where the play was set.



In *Mapait sa Bao* (1980), the use of bamboos to delineate the scene is enough to convey meaning, using the principle of “less is more.”

Still pursuing the contemporarization of traditional theater, PETA also did its version of a *sarsuwela*, the *Pilipinas Ca. 1907* (1982). An anti-American period play, the set used thin plywood but captured the time through the use of architectural elements and interior accessories in its furnishing and embellishments. The costumes also provided the color and texture of the period. The point was to capture the period without being cumbersome and realistic in treatment.



*Pilipinas Ca. 1907* (1982)

And finally, when *Panata sa Kalayaan/Oath to Freedom* (1986) was mounted, the designers had to consider portability since it was going to be a traveling show abroad. To solve the problem of scenery, certain costumes were painted which carried visual meaning, thus the play was not lacking in establishing place or time.

The creation of highly original and unique artistic statements has resulted from these processes and approaches, mainly because of the imperative to eliminate non-essentials. Instead, basic ideas, meaning, and images were focused on rather than superfluities and ornamentations. The PETA designer realized then that nothing can prevent the artist, who had a rich imagination, to achieve maximum results from simple and inexpensive materials. Non-imitative and original, the resulting aesthetics is from the quality of form and expression that neither ignores nor glosses over conditions of poverty.

Aesthetics of Poverty stemmed out of a social condition and in effect the quality of life found in depressed areas during those depressed times. A highly expressive art has evolved from such a condition. Recognizing this condition of poverty, a Philippine

theater aesthetics could evolve as values are reexamined. An imitative colonial culture no longer exists in this particular theater because it does not seek outside models to be able to create. It looks into itself and interprets ideas according to its own perceptions and comprehensions. It continues to explore ideas to strengthen itself. A people's appreciation of beauty is not stunted just because they are poor. In fact, their sense of beauty, coupled with their passion for truth, results in a powerful expression that is part of the process of survival and change. If theater is to be a living tradition, then it must express the life and culture of a people.

To summarize, art is a human experience manifest in the works of an artist who lives through the experience. The artist sometimes creates objects for use, at other times ideas are explored. In both instances the practitioner belongs to a particular time and space. The art experience is not separate from other life experiences. The artist does not exist in a vacuum, but is surrounded by people and events which are reflected in choices, judgments, and insights.

Since the individual is shaped by culture and the various sub-cultures of a particular society, both artist and percipients are affected by conditions of culture. Moreover, since the individual who creates infuses the work with values, a work of art is the product of insights. At the same time, it becomes a source of insight for the percipient. This makes art a function of value attitudes and value insights, and both the creation and the appreciation of art inherent in social values.

One way of appraising the state of a society is to measure the state of its art, for art contains the ideas, thoughts, feelings, aspirations, spirit, and angst of the people who create it. The artistic achievements reached by a society is a mark of its internal power, a symbol of the worth and quality of life that went on within it. Although the expressive side of art can bring the feelings of innumerable ages about all the major concerns of life, the specific contributions of the arts are not limited to the expressive side alone. It can also arise from materials and form, which may alter the taste of people. In our part of the world, people are confronted with problems of survival: economic, social, political, and cultural. The artist of this particular milieu struggles through crises as do fellow members in that society. Together, both artists and percipients develop a particular artistic taste and evolve a peculiar aesthetic sense fashioned by the conditions of their environment.

Because of the culture of material poverty, the artist's taste for color or material is oftentimes limited by what is available. But what is initially a by-product of material poverty becomes an expression which results from sensitivity to the world. The artist begins to choose deliberately particular nuances and tones of color and texture that



would express the qualities that are perceived—economic deprivation, cultural pollution, senseless violence. A new art begins to evolve which is authentic, because it expresses life which happens to be in a poor condition, thus the “aesthetics of poverty.”

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