

FORUM KRITIKA: PHILIPPINE THEATER AND MARTIAL LAW (PART 1)

Introduction

PHILIPPINE THEATER IN CONFINEMENT: BREAKING OUT OF MARTIAL LAW

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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” will be published in installments in consecutive issues of *Kritika Kultura*. This issue features an introduction by Bienvenido Lumbera, and three paper testimonials from the “cultural workers” of the period.

Abstract

The declaration of Martial Law during the Marcos administration brought about a period of censorship and a complete rejection of any form of protest against the established figures of authority. Activists then looked for other forms of communication through which they could channel their dissent and rally more people towards the cause. It was during this period that Philippine theater was taken out of the stage and into the streets, when the “art” of the “elite” was brought down to the masses. These efforts also shifted the language of Philippine theater from American English to Pilipino, marking the beginning of a new stage of development of drama in the country.

About the author

Bienvenido Lumbera is among the most multi-awarded Filipinos today. He was Ateneo’s Tanglaw ng Lahi Awardee in 2000, recipient of the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1993, and winner of literary awards like the Centennial Literary Awards in Playwriting in 1998. He is among the country’s most respected literary and cultural critics who has published books of poems, plays, librettos, essays, translation, criticism and literary history, and continues to mentor the country’s best writers, teachers, and scholars. Detained during the Marcos dictatorship, he continues to be active in the movement for nationalism, freedom, and democracy. He was Irwin Chair Professor of Literature in the English Department of the Ateneo de Manila, and now Professor Emeritus of the University of the Philippines. He is a national council member of the multi-sectoral Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (BAYAN) and chair of the Concerned Artists of the Philippines (CAP) and an active member of other groups clamoring for nationalism and social justice. He is the National Artist for Literature in 2006 for outstanding contributions to the development of Philippine arts and culture.

Keywords

history of Philippine Theater, protest drama, student activism

It was student activists pursuing organizational work in the late 1960s who, without meaning to, found a language for theater people that would link them to a mass audience. In the previous decade, a common complaint by aficionados of theater was that Filipinos

did not know how to appreciate plays, perhaps because movies had spoiled their capacity to enjoy a live performance by actors onstage. Activists had made use of short skits about matters that concern ordinary people to win audiences to their cause, and found Tagalog an effective medium in drawing audiences and getting them to pay attention. Those who directed and acted in these skits called themselves “cultural workers” instead of “artists” and the distinction was significant. As “workers,” they identified themselves with the “common people” in the audience, instead of raising themselves as belonging to an elite specializing in “art.” The performance areas for the activist presentation were easily accessible—streets, plazas, factory sites, open fields—convenient sites where people can be gathered at any time with no need for special lighting or sound equipment. In brief, theater had returned to its primitive site and found itself communing with the people.

While mainstream theater, i.e., theater in school auditoriums and in the standard venues for play production, was in the process of solving its problem with a sparse audience, Pilipino was gaining acceptance as a language for the stage. Where before, the national language was thought *baduy*, it was being buoyed up by the tide of nationalism in universities and colleges that had been “infected” by the nationalist ideas in Teodoro A. Agoncillo’s *A History of the Filipino People* and by Claro M. Recto’s growing disdain, as expressed in his speeches, for the Magsaysay administration’s subservience to the US Embassy.

Among theater people, the thrust was towards a definition of a sense of “national identity.” Among the intelligentsia, there appeared a marked interest in antiques and artifacts recovered in excavation sites, and newsmen were making the “Philippine Past” a fashionable topic. Historical data related to the Reform movement, the Revolution of 1896, and Filipino-American war drew scholars and researchers, and even newspaper columnists and reporters, to archival collections.

In the Ateneo de Manila High School, young playwrights under the tutelage of Onofre Pagsanghan were writing and producing Tagalog plays as classroom exercises. Rolando Tinio abandoned his experimental theater and turned to translating standard American plays, like *The Glass Menagerie* and *Death of a Salesman*, even venturing into a revival of turn of the century *zarzuela* with a production of *Paglipas ng Dilim*. By the close of the decade, Tagalog had established itself as the language of Philippine Theater.

The decade of the 60s, by its political and cultural thrust, may be cited as a turning point in the history of Philippine Theater. The combined action of the activist political theater and the cultural direction of mainstream theater, it defined the path of development of the technology and thematic concerns of the staging and the writing of future plays.

The breakdown of proscenium staging, the cultural past and contemporaneous political experience as source of subject matter, the exploration through translation of foreign culture, and above all, the emergence of the people's language as medium—these are the legacy of the 1960s.

Proclamation 1081 sought to put an end to the political and cultural ferment of the 1960s. It put the movement for change under confinement. Letter of Instruction 1 ordered Marcos's Secretary of National Defense "to take over and control and cause the taking over and control of all such newspapers, magazines, radio and television facilities and all other media of communication wherever they are...." Such total control of media meant total control of the public mind.

Theater as a medium of communication is performative, with live actors acting out what the play wants to say to the audience. A performance puts the actors under risk of arrest when the content of the play is deemed by Martial Law authorities as inappropriate. In the early years of the American occupation, performances of anti-American plays had been stopped and the cast and the writer arrested and fined by the courts. Fear of the military under Marcos made drama groups very cautious, and the first two years of Martial Law saw them putting on safe Broadway musicals, entertaining *zarzuelas* and rock operas, and harmless comedies.

The times, however, were much troubled by military abuses perpetrated on suspected subversives and innocent civilians in urban poor communities. The military and the police have routinely raided communities where criminal elements were supposed to congregate. The Martial Law regime wanted to pride itself as having brought about peace and order in the country and any disturbance of the law would mar that image. It was supposed to have created a New Society, and the suppression of lawlessness was meant to justify the declaration of Martial Law. The prohibition of rallies and demonstrations then widespread in pre-Martial Law days was supposed to have created an atmosphere conducive to the entry of foreign investments in the cities and the countryside.

While open expression of dissent had been suppressed, the national democratic underground and other oppositionists were active in organizing among workers, students, and the religious. Cultural workers in pre-Martial Law youth organizations continued to secretly stir up discontent in communities. Then, in 1976, the labor union in La Tondena defied the no-strike ban and the workers received support from activists among the youth and the religious. Although there was no media coverage from the Marcos-controlled publications, the strike was well-covered by the underground press and by word of mouth.

The strike was a signal that dissent could break through the repressive measures of the dictatorship.

Protest theater under Martial Law had to camouflage its political intent in order to reach its public. Drama groups found the dictatorship's pretense at "development concerns" a convenient cover for their effort to expose the social realities that belied the dictatorship's claims for the gains of Proclamation 1081. When the batilyos of the Navotas fishport protested loss of jobs through mechanization of the delivery of the catch from the fishing boats to the shore, the 1976 play *Buhay Batilyo: Hindi Kami Susuko* was passed off as in line with the New Society's concern for the poor. Similarly, the resistance of the Ifugaos to the building of the Chico River Dam in Amelia Lapena Bonifacio's *Ang Bundok* (1976) was made to dovetail with the developmental goals of the New Society for the indigenous Filipinos.

The Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) took a bolder stance when it produced in 1977 Lito Tiongson's *Walang Kamatayang Buhay ni Juan de la Cruz Alyas....* (Fernandez 111). Ostensibly, the play was supposed to depict a historical phenomenon when the American colonial administration developed the concept of zona whereby a community in the countryside is transplanted to an urban setting in order to deprive revolutionaries shelter among the rural folk. In Tiongson's play, the zona of the Americans was actually an allusion to the Martial Law military's zona by which it hoped to contain the activities of the New People's Army (NPA) in the countryside. The *alyas* in the title was a reminder to the audience of the underground elements who used pseudonyms as they mingled with the civilian populace. Furthermore, *walang kamatayang buhay* implies that no matter military suppression, the underground movement will continue to struggle against the New Society.

The University of the Philippines (UP) Repertory was even more blatant in its defiance of the Martial Law regime. Bonifacio Ilagan's *Pagsambang Bayan*¹ (1977) sought the cover of religion in exposing the repressive rule of the Marcos dictatorship, but it was quite openly provocative in voicing its exhortations to resistance (Fernandez 134-36). Various sectors (workers, peasants, students, indigenous peoples, urban poor, etc.) take turns in urging the priest (who serves as the central figure in the religious ritual that frames the narrative) to take the side of the suffering populace. The text of the play is derived largely from the bible, so that the priest had to yield to the insistence of his congregation for compliance to the teachings of the church which he represented. At the close the play, the priest takes off his religious garb and he is identified as a peasant prepared to take up the

struggle of the oppressed.

In 1983, the year Ninoy Aquino was assassinated, naked hatred for the dictator was evident in the street play *Ilokula, ang Ilokanong Dracula*² which did away with any protective cover and showed Marcos and Imelda along with their daughter Imee as a monstrous threesome. Marcos, who in actuality was suffering from lupus, underwent an operation in the play, and from his innards were retrieved body parts of the victims of Martial Law (Fernandez 133-34).

Perhaps the best of the protest plays of Martial Law, *Buwan at Baril in b# minor*³ (1985) by Chris Millado consisted of four episodes that summed up the impact of the dictatorship on the lives of the Filipino people (Fernandez 200-15). The first episode is about two brothers, one a peasant from the province and the other a worker who is a city resident, who meet at a mass action in Manila, establishing the two classes which compose the majority of the Filipinos fighting Martial Law. In the second episode, we are told about a young woman at an evacuation center who turns out to have been gang raped by soldiers who raided a remote village in search of NPA rebels. The third episode provides a comic touch to the play, depicting a middle-class matron dressing up to join a rally talking to her maid, and in the process making the audience aware of the politicization of the social class quite active in the anti-dictatorship movement. In the same episode, another woman is shown—the wife of an NPA guerrilla fighter who had been killed in an encounter, on her way to claim her husband's body in the military camp. In the final episode, a student activist matches wits with a police officer who had been in his younger days also a student activist. The student had been picked up in the street for violation of the curfew set by the Martial Law government. The student is able to convince the policeman to let him off as a harmless sluggard. The officer shortly after finds out too late that he had set free a "notorious" student leader.

Theater under Martial Law was placed in confinement as per Proclamation 1081. Cultural workers with links in the underground movement, however, found ways of circumventing the prohibitions of the New Society, sometimes breaking out of their confinement by riding on the programs ran by the government or by taking the risk of outright defiance of the authorities. Making theater in perilous times was a challenge that brought forth the creativity of the cultural groups and enriched the practice of the art of make-believe.

NOTES

- ¹ A printed version of the play is in *Bangon: Antolohiya ng mga Dulang Mapanghimsik*, 195-236.
- ² A printed version of the play is in *Bangon*, 293-300.
- ³ A printed version of the play is in *Bangon*, 311-60.

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