

FORUM KRITIKA: PHILIPPINE THEATER AND MARTIAL LAW

PLAYWRITING IN THE TIME OF EXIGENCY

Rodolfo Vera
rodyvera@gmail.com

Abstract

This is a personal testimony of a dramatist trained and honed in the craft of drama and stage during the Marcos dictatorship. Unable to finish college, and without a formal training in drama or playwriting, my main reason for writing and struggling in the field of theater was to be able to address the need for change in the Filipino audience's social consciousness. It will deal with the following topics: what my training ground had been like under the informal guidance of playwrights who had just a little bit more training than I had in the craft, the different dramatic styles used, dramaturgical devices that my colleagues and I developed in order to avoid the clutches of censorship and repression of the Marcos regime, what my dramatist collaborators and contemporaries and I drew from other political plays from other countries (like the agit-prop forms, dramatic theories of Brecht), as well as from the earlier political dramas in the country (seditious plays of the American colonial era), and the radical tradition that had taken shape in the Philippines prior to Martial Law, and how we tried to help in building the foundation of playwriting in the country, and developing the forms that were produced for lightning productions as well as the most effective dramatic strategies in the theatrical exposition of issues in order to persuade and enlighten the audience.

About the author

Rodolfo "Rody" Vera is a playwright, actor, and singer who first made a mark as Artistic Director of PATATAG singing group and as musical director to some of its album recordings. He went on to become Artistic Director of the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) from 1995 to 1997, and has appeared in a few musicals and films, notably *Sister Stella L.* and the grand musical *1896*. His plays include: *Kung Paano Ko Pinatay si Diana Ross* (2nd Prize, Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards), *Ang Paglalakbay ni Radiya Mangandiri: Isang Pilipinong Ramayana*, *Balangiga* (2nd Prize, Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards), *Luna: Isang Romansang Aswang* (First Prize, Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards), and *Dreamweavers* (Second Prize, Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards). His latest, *Ismail at Isabel* (First Prize, Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards), is currently being toured by PETA. *Senyor Paciano*, his first film script, won Second Prize in the National Centennial Literary Awards in 1998. He has co-written films for film director Ellen Marfil: *Mga Pusang Gala* and *Boses*.

I was asked to write a paper about playwriting during Martial Law. And since I'm not an academician, I've decided to write my story instead. So this paper is more of a personal account of what I went through as a young impressionable, idealistic playwright during the years of the dictatorship, in my case, specifically around 1977 through 1985. I will also talk about my friends, my colleagues, my mentors during this time.

When President Ferdinand Marcos declared Martial Law in 1972, I was barely 12. But while I was just a boy then, my sentiments against the prevailing regime were quite

clear to me. My two elder sisters were social action activists and I remember one time, I even saw my mother picketing the Malacanang Palace in 1971, on my way back home. I remember that night when Martial law was declared. I had broken something in the house and I got punished for it. The next day, the whole family was in a huddle, looking very worried; my little crime forgotten because a much bigger one, national in scale, has just been committed. I remember the fear in the eyes of my sisters. Fear for their own safety and the safety of their friends who were active in mass actions, etc.

I instinctively knew what censorship meant, upon seeing the fear in my sisters' eyes. Curfew hours were imposed. And since we lived very near the Malacanang Palace, our household was one of the first subjected to zoning. I remember one early morning call by the military. They herded all the adult males in each household, including my father, for what they called a "routine" security check. In one public school. My father. Along with all the male adult neighbors were lined up for inspection and interrogation. It seemed that the first few years of Martial Law attempted to be as systematic as the fascist dictatorship of Hitler.

But I guess, after a few years, when the dictator felt that he had virtually crushed any opposition, he had to project an image of progress and international recognition, instead of the fear and the tyranny.

By the time I was in high school, the general public seemed used to the routine of propaganda about the New Society's achievements. Interestingly, one of my sisters began to warm up to this as well. But I eventually took the other route, the route they would have continued to take about five years back, before Martial Law was declared.

Though my first exposure to theater was way back when I was in Grade 2—appearing in a Fr. Reuter production (*Francis of Navarre*, 1967)—I must say my first real encounter with the theater was when I was freshman in high school. The first full-length production I have seen at the University of the Philippines (UP) Abelardo Hall. It was a UP Samaskom production written and directed by Reijoo de la Cruz entitled *Programang Putol Putol* (1975). I was so taken by the play, I watched it a second time. That play stuck in my mind for quite a long time. I thought all plays were like that—structured in an "absurdist" style, cloaked in so many symbols and deceptive devices. My introduction to theater, therefore was through this route, which led me to read up on so-called absurdist dramatists like Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Samuel Beckett, and I guess, Edward Albee—all of whom I read in my second year in high school. These plays I read and kept only to myself.

It was before my third year in high school that I enrolled in a summer workshop for teenagers in the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) (1976). In that workshop, I learned the value of theater not only as a medium of self-expression, but as a medium of advocacy. Of course at that time, we didn't call it advocacy. We called it, socially relevant.

It was in this workshop that I began to value the importance of social investigation, conducting exposure trips, interviewing people—meaning basic masses, realizing that the world around me is not a conglomeration of things that make up a meaningless, “absurd” world; that society is suffering not only from colonial mentality but, from extreme poverty, exploitation by greedy capitalists and feudal landlords, a terribly corrupt justice system, a deceptive and highly commercialized educational system, etc. etc.—problems which are far worse today. In short, this workshop was the start of my conscientization. Not a very popular word these days for conscientization meant a developing faith in an ideology for change.

That is why the very first play I wrote when I was in my junior year in high school had that mix of nihilist satire which I probably picked up from Reijoo's surreal productions and the unguided cry of protest against the educational system in my school. The title of this one act play, *Rises* (1977), seemed so controversial in the eyes of the school administrator that they decided to limit the showing to a select batch of students. It was my first brush with censorship, a qualified one.

My theater education was mainly, almost solely, provided by PETA. I became a member of the company, and eventually, too, became a member of the underground group of artists within the company. We all knew each other during short-term trainings conducted by PETA as a “legal” organization. We have become friends. But in the underground group. We weren't only friends. We were comrades. We had a single unifying purpose: to use art to advance the revolution that is silently gathering adherents among the different sectors of society. We called ourselves the “cultural” sector. In this underground group, we would conduct our own workshops—specifically for what we call revolutionary art and theater. It was not much different from what we were learning during the short-term workshop courses we've been taking in the “legal” setting. The main difference being that in the “underground” venue, we were exploring the craft in the context of revolution and armed struggle. Sometimes these workshops would, for some reason merge and lose their distinction. Probably because the members and the organizers of a particular workshop seemed to be all bona fide members of the mass-movement during that time, so it would sound ridiculous if we were keeping secret what everyone in the workshop

already knew: that we were all certified members of the National Democratic Front, at least. These workshops would then assume a category called “semi-legal.” It became easier to deepen political discussions, which included more radical solutions, such as armed struggle and revolution.

The Palihang Aurelio Tolentino was one such workshop. It was a two week playwriting workshop course that, I believe, had three batches. I was in the third batch (1979). This was organized by theater artists from different groups, in UP and PETA. Combined with the PETA style of improvisatory learning and lectures by several professors from the universities, and interviews with key resource persons from basic organized mass sectors such as urban poor, workers and farmers, the Palihang Aurelio Tolentino aimed to develop playwrights for political/activist theater in the Philippines. My batchmates came from various “cultural” groups in Manila, Mindanao, and the Visayas. The main thrust of the workshop was to examine Philippine theater, its history and the various forms it has developed. We were supposed to know more about the various Philippine theater forms: Realismo, Ekspresyonismo, Traditional theater forms, etc. We hoped to discover various ways of contemporizing traditional forms, for instance the *sarsuwela* and the *panunuluyan* and how, by using these forms could the pressing political and economic issues be made clearer to the audience, along with the prescribed solutions to these problems, i.e., armed struggle, etc.

After this workshop, I was then tapped to write plays not only for PETA but for various events and organizations. I wrote scripts for cultural nights commemorating heroes of the mass movement, short skits that will be performed by “guerilla” actors in mass-actions such as rallies and/or picket lines, indignation rallies, etc. Other playwrights wrote scripts and skits that depicted the lives of contemporary heroes such as Dr. Bobby de la Paz, Eman Lacaba, etc. These small plays, and they are a lot, though largely undocumented, were in line with the agit-prop objectives of the organized movement. There was a pressing need to popularize not only the various theater forms, but the political issues in a way that ordinary people can understand. Songs and plays were the most flexible and easily disseminated.

But apart from these blitzkrieg productions in the streets and indoor mass action events, I and other playwrights wrote plays for the so called “legitimate stage” — which, again, to distinguish from the “illegitimate” productions I just mentioned. The “legitimate” plays were performed in theaters, or proper venues which the “general” public usually attend. Most of these plays were performed by theater companies in universities. The leading company in the university then, as far as I could remember, was the UP Repertory

company, headed by Behn Cervantes. Plays written by Bonifacio Ilagan and Ed Maranan were performed by this active group of cultural workers.

I have not seen all of these plays by the UP Rep because we were also quite busy writing plays for PETA, which, at this time had established a writer's pool. This pool's main objective was to churn out plays for PETA's season. The main resident playwrights of the company were Alan Glinoga, Al Santos, myself, Malou Jacob, and a few others. Other playwrights such as Reuel Aguila and Rene Villanueva were "freelancing." They were members of the writer's group GAT or Galian sa Arte at Tula back then. But Rene wrote more plays than he wrote poems. And his plays were performed by various companies such as: Gantimpala Theater at the CCP, Dulaang UP, PETA, and a few others.

Rene became my mentor when I started writing plays for PETA's teen theater component. We wrote this allegorical political satire set in an ant colony (*Kutsabahan sa Tirarang*, 1979). It was by far one of the worst theater productions in PETA. I remember Lino Brocka, who was then Executive Director of the company lambasting the play for its out-and-out propagandistic, entirely formulaic allegory of the Philippines under the dictatorship. Imagine American colonizer ants exploiting the worker ants, who eventually rose up and drove the greedy ant invaders away, along with their stooge dictator queen ant (traipsing like an Imelda Marcos.).

This was, in fact, a reflection of a brewing aesthetic crisis happening within the ranks of cultural workers all over the country. It seemed that a dogmatic rendition of the main objective of popularizing the revolution has stunted and stultified the numerous versions of plays performed by avid, young revolutionary cultural workers like ... well, me.

Even in most of the showcases performed in PETA's workshops in organized communities, and most, appallingly, in the national cultural festivals held by PETA in 1983 and 1984 (dubbed the Makiisa Festival)—the same "formula" revealed itself.

The formula is this: The play usually starts with a community—it may be an indigenous community, an ant colony, a flock of birds, or maybe, even just a neighborhood. This community presents an ideal setting, albeit poor and backward, democracy reigns and the inhabitants live happy and simple lives. The second part of the dramaturgy introduces the intruder/invasion, dangling carrots of promises of progress and wealth. The inhabitants are blinded by greed. The third part ensues—where the people suffer the consequences of this change: poverty and exploitation are enforced. When the inhabitants begin to complain, a dictator is installed. And because of this tyranny, the people begin to organize and unite to fight against this evil and drive both the installed dictator and foreign invader away.

There were of course many variations of this plot line. Some of them may have been successful I must admit, because of the sheer passion that went with the performance of the plays. However, the enthusiasm among organized mass audiences was quite encouraging. And yet, when the mass movement began to decline towards the latter part of the eighties, the enthusiasm for such productions also began to wane.

Nevertheless, brilliant plays have been staged and produced. Plays written by the likes of Al Santos, Malou Jacob, Reuel Aguila, and Rene Villanueva have reflected ingeniously the intensity of the times. Reuel Aguila's *In Dis Korner* (1978), for example, was a detailed anatomy of corruption in the boxing world. In many instances, the play itself mirrors the same corrupt system that pervades other sectors of power, namely the government. He has also written for PETA a play entitled *Mapait sa Bao* (1980), derived from an earlier, more schematic story by Len Santos. It is a story of a family of coconut farmers whose painful disintegration signaled the beginning of globalization and further disenfranchisement of farmers. Malou Jacob's *Juan Tambo* (1979) is an indicting commentary of poverty and the nonchalance of the middle class's apolitical stance. Al Santos's major works have been mostly musicals and dance dramas. He has written a considerable number of songs on nuclear disarmament, dictatorship and the US military presence in the Philippines. *Nukleyar* (1982), a dance essay, if I should dare to label it, has been performed likewise in Kuala Lumpur in 1985.

Alan Glinoga, one of the stalwarts of PETA's Writer's Pool excelled magnificently in translating a most difficult play by Bertolt Brecht, *Galileo* (1981). PETA's continuous



Galileo, by Bertolt Brecht. Translated by Alan Glinoga. This PETA production is directed by Fritz Bennewitz. 1981



CB Garrucho as Lady Macbeth in PETA's production directed by Fritz Bennewitz. Translation by Rody Vera.

program of understanding, performing, and adapting Brecht's plays and dramatic theories became one of the company's distinguishing marks in Philippine Theater. I know of no other theater company that had performed and adapted Brecht more than PETA had done in its entire existence. This was further enhanced and deepened by PETA's long partnership with Weimar National Theater's Artistic Director Fritz Bennewitz. Fritz became my mentor in translating and adapting Shakespeare as well. And under him I had undergone a full course on play analysis and dramaturgy, which for me, became the most significant lesson in my career as a playwright.

Striving to understand fully well, each line and breath of a play, as Brecht himself would have wanted every writer to do, was what I learned from Bennewitz, who would spend hours under the scorching sun at the Rajah Sulayman theater going through Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1984) or Brecht's *Galileo* (1981) over and over again while conveniently getting a tan.

To summarize, Martial Law became my OJT in playwriting. Starting with a jocular brainstorming with Rene Villanueva on drafting political allegories, and then working with Al Santos on a contemporary, highly political version of the traditional *Panunuluyan* (1979)—like who could ever imagine, at that time, that a religious traditional play depicting the birth of Christ could transform into a passionate polemic on worker's rights, urban



Ang Panunuluyan ng Birheng Maria at San Jose sa Cubao, Ayala, Plaza Miranda atbp, sa Loob at Labas ng Metro Manila. Collectively written by Alan Glinoga, Al Santos, Rody Vera. This PETA production is directed by Joel Lamangan.



PILIPINAS Circa 1907. Written by Nicanor Tiongson. This PETA Production is directed by Soxie Topacio.



Rody Vera's *Isang Rihersal: Ang Pag-iensayo ng Kahapon, Ngayon at Bukas ni Aurelio V. Tolentino*. 1983. Directed by Joel Lamangan.

poor struggle, and liberation theology? And finally working with Fritz Bennewitz, as he delineates in wondrous detail, a line by line explanation of *Macbeth* (1984) and the rest of Shakespeare's tragedies in Marxist terms—and how a Brechtian approach to Shakespeare could provide a much deeper and profoundly political understanding of theater.

Those were my formative years, the informal, intermittent courses on playwriting without the convenience of structured learning in the academe. For in between, we also knew we had to write with a high sense of urgency. The scripts we hurriedly typed, many times with no carbon copies, no matter how didactic, or formulaic, or highly propagandistic, were welcomed by the mass movement and the cultural sector because we thought what mattered most was how to rouse the audience, the masses to eventually take action against tyranny. These hurriedly written dramatic forms easily faded and became brittle and the power they had earlier eventually waned. But I would like to think that they have served their purpose at the time we wrote and performed them. Given the circumstances, I don't think any committed writer then would say, "No, I'd rather write a work that would endure for generations." Instead we told ourselves we needed to seize the moment and do what had to be done for that moment. In many ways, that stood to become the more heroic choice.