

## BENDING ENGLISH FOR THE FILIPINO STAGE

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### Abstract

Through representative examples of Filipino plays in English that were written during the American colonial regime, the article traces how playwriting and the theater were instrumental in teaching the English language to Filipinos educated in the American educational project. To make the transition from the local languages to the newly acquired English easier to contextualize, the English in the colonial-period plays was consciously stylized to sound “as though [the characters] were speaking in their own tongues”—thus the phrase ‘bending English’. Having “bent English” indeed does make reading easier for Filipinos, however the performances of plays with “bent English” provide a rich field of discussion on incongruities and disjunctions of linguistic experimentation.

### Keywords

colonial education, English language, Philippine theater

### About the Author

Bienvenido Lumbera is among the country’s 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 prestigious 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 or the Concerned Artists of the Philippines (CAP) and an active member of other groups clamoring for nationalism and social justice. He is the country’s National Artist for Literature in 2006 for outstanding contributions to the development of Philippine arts and culture.

English-language playwriting in the Philippines is a colonial heritage born of a project conceived in the matrix of the system of education designed to pacify a people from whom revolutionary victory over Spanish colonialism was wrested at the Treaty of Paris in 1898. With English decreed by the American colonial administration as the medium of instruction, an English-language theater offered itself as a useful vehicle for the dissemination of English. Dramatic performances would expose young Filipinos to spoken English outside the classroom, and along with the language, “modern” values from America could be introduced by plays infused with the culture of the new colonial masters. Thus, the first play in English, written by two students of the Philippine Normal College,

was a product of the classroom in a teacher-training institution founded by the Americans. The title of the play was *A Modern Filipina* and it was about a young woman determined to chart out her own future all by herself, just like any modern American girl.

Writing about Philippine theater under the American colonial regime, Doreen Fernandez notes examples of “textbook plays” which were “aimed at teaching the language, at practicing the students in the speaking of it” and concludes that “plays, staged in classrooms as language exercises, came to be many a student’s first (and lasting) impression of theater.” Such beginnings for English-language plays help us appreciate the early thrust of playwriting which sought to craft English dialogue correct in grammar and syntax and yet approximating the manner of Filipinos speaking in their native language. The creative effort exerted to achieve the effect of making Filipino characters talk as though they were speaking in their native tongue, even as the words coming out of their mouth are in English, is what this essay refers to as “bending English.”

Jean Garrot Edades gathered early Filipino plays in English in her anthology *Short Plays of the Philippines* (1950). *Educating Josefina* (1939), a one-act play by Lilia A. Villa, is about a peasant couple who had sent their daughter Josefina to the city for a university education. Ingo, the father, is complaining to his wife Tonia about the expense of maintaining their daughter in the university. Tonia, however, is unperturbed for she is anticipating the prestige the family will enjoy in their town when Josefina graduates with a degree in pharmacy, and for that the financial sacrifice she and her husband are making will be rewarded. Josefina comes home with expensive gifts for her parents, but her father and mother note that she has been transformed and spoiled by her stay in the university. Her looks and her manner of dressing are those of a “modern girl.” And worse of all, she has become rude and headstrong, announcing to her shocked parents that she has, all by herself, decided to quit school and is preparing to marry a rich young man from the city.

The playwright calls her work a “satirical comedy,” but it is really more of a cautionary tale for parents who, at a great sacrifice, send children to live away in the city to study, only to realize that the sacrifice is for naught. The speech of the peasant couple is simple and believable in keeping with their back country origins. When Josefina unwraps her presents, Ingo tells her “Your mother and I don’t care to be *postura*.” The recourse to the use of a native expression is necessary, imposed by the inadequacy of any English word or expression conveying the peasant’s sense of preening for public appreciation. Josefina no longer wants to be called by her wonted name Pinang, and tells her mother “How many times must I tell you not to call me Pinang?” In response Tonia calls her by her full name but mispronounces it as a woman of the countryside would, “Diosepin.” In this play,

“bending English” means the introduction of a native word or expression to communicate the tone that best replicates an ethnically determined experience.

In the same year that *Educating Josefina* was first performed, *Sa Pula, Sa Puti* (1929) by Francisco Rodrigo took up the widely popular Filipino vice of cockfighting. Another peasant couple is at the center of the play, the husband Kulas, a habitu  of the cockpit, and the patient wife Celina who is waiting for the day when by some miracle Kulas would tire of cockfighting. Celina has devised a way of winning back the money her husband loses when the latter’s cock is struck down – she sends the old servant Teban to bet on the opponent’s cock. Her trick fails when Kulas’s friend Castor introduces the latter to his way of cheating at the game. Castor teaches Kulas to weaken his cock’s striking leg by piercing it with a needle, and then to bet on the opponent’s cock. As things turned out, both Kulas and Celina lost their bets because on that occasion Kulas’s cock won by default when the opposing cock ran away.

Rodrigo’s “comedy of the cockpit” illustrates a freer way of “bending English” and delivers a more vivid impression of “native” speech. The dialogues have been liberally flavored with Tagalog expressions in near-literal English translation. Castor comes upon a woebegone Kulas and chides: “Why do you wear a funeral parlor on your face?” Celina expresses her disgust at the amounts Kulas has been gambling away at the cockpit: “I’m sure someday we’ll be eating just rice and salt.” To her friend Sioning’s remark that Celina thinks too far ahead in imagining the evil consequences of Kulas’s fondness for cockfighting, Celina retorts “shall we wait for the fire to start before we prepare the water?” And to the prospect of Kulas making good his promise to quit cockfighting, Celina’s rejoinder is “You may just as well write that promise on water.”

*Educating Josefina* and *Sa Pula, Sa Puti* may be cited as indicators for the young playwrights of the beginning years of English-language theater the paths open to them when they use English to dramatize subject matter that might be more effectively written in any of the native languages. The two plays are early experiments to be sure, classroom exercises that test the students’ ability to handle English in talking about commonplace life situations in those years before playwriting, on the basis of printed dramas from abroad, began to demand a more complex understanding of Philippine society. *Educating Josefina* hints at a more serious problem confronting parents, that of urbanization and the revolution of values that accompanies it. To be certain, tackling that problem would require from the writer a sophisticated outlook on social relations and a corresponding English style capable of expressiveness and nuances that the young Villa’s prose could not yet deliver. It is the comic genre that *Sa Pula, Sa Puti* exemplifies, which could successfully

reach out to audiences with English words and phrases that distill the native and the foreign in lines redolent of folk and colloquial speech such as “Follow soon, ha?” (Sunod ka agad, ha?). As subsequent developments in English-language playwriting would show, it was Rodrigo’s “bent English” that would take.

*Wanted: A Chaperon* (1940) by Wilfrido Ma. Guerrero is a lively comedy that makes audiences almost forget that the characters are talking in English, a sign that the playwright has succeeded very well in “bending English” for his middleclass characters. Ostensibly about the standard subject of parents seeing to the moral welfare of their children who have entered period of young adulthood, Guerrero presents his audience with two societies represented by parents who come from the Hispanized past and the children who belong to the emerging Americanized present, the two societies in contention in the world of “pre-war” Philippines. There is confusion in the home of Don Francisco, who has just acquired a new servant who wants to be designated “mayordomo” on the very day that he and his wife Doña Dolores want to look into the previous night’s dates of their daughter Nena and of their son Roberting. Here the playwright has constructed a metaphor about a society caught up in a socio-cultural crisis. The language is a mixture of formal English and snatches of Spanish, with hints of the vernacular, the language of a society in transition. Forty years after the introduction of English into the country, Guerrero is writing about Filipinos as though his Filipinos were born using the language. The playwright, however, proves himself a stranger to certain idiomatic English phrases as when he allows Don Francisco the unintended gaffe of saying to his son in recalling his courtship of his wife “When I was making love to your mother I would give her only mani or balut.”

In 1950, Philippine writing was to receive a boost when La Tondeña instituted the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature, with the short story being the only category in the initial year of the awards. In 1954, however, the one-act play was added to the categories of the awards. The years that followed were to yield more one-acters although many of these were to remain unperformed. The first playwright to be awarded First Prize was Alberto Florentino, and in him the English-language play was to find an exponent of socially conscious writing at a time when literary critics were leery about what was thought to be “propagandistic” literature. Florentino in his plays preferred to dramatize the grim lives of urban poor characters whose revolt against an unjust social system was dramatized in stark English dialogue. *Cadaver* (1954) tells about a graveyard plunderer who robbed the dead of whatever valuables had been buried with them. A cut sustained while robbing a tomb has spread fatal contagion in his system. In his hovel at the edge of a cemetery, Torio is dying and his wife Marina and fellow grave robber Carding

are helplessly keeping vigil at his bedside, with no doctor to minister to him. Torio in his delirious state accuses Marina of having a secret liaison with Carding. In response to his wife's vehement denials, he begins to blurt out the desperation with which he had been eking a livelihood in a society where the dead are often materially better off than the living poor. Marina is horrified that she has been living on resources that Torio's sacrilegious plundering of tombs has yielded.

The sordid subject matter of *Cadaver* and the realism with which Florentino treats the theme of society's indifference to the plight of the poor somehow prods an audience to raise the question of appropriate language for such a play. Realism calls for language that would allow the three characters to plumb the deepest recesses of their emotive power. Such language, given the social origins of Torio, Marina and Carding, cannot be English.

Florentino's English in *Cadaver* has shown the limitation of English as a medium for realistic Filipino drama. In the 1950s, Filipino authors had begun to gain access to the plays of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, William Inge and other realist playwrights from America and Europe. Drama in that decade was as yet an occasional cultural form, available mainly in print, hardly in performance at all. As literary pieces entered in the Palanca contest, English-language plays had lost much innocence through their authors' contact with Western fiction in creative writing classes in college. The cardboard representation of the clash between urban and city cultures in *Educating Josefina*, and the adequacy of English for such a simplification of the conflict, could no longer stand up to critical scrutiny. Even the charming folk-flavored English of *Sa Pula, Sa Puti* was to prove to be of limited utility in a literary scene where peasant problems were shown to have dimensions that "a comedy of the cockpit" could not foreshadow.

In the 1960s, drama would cease to be regarded as reading matter alongside the short story and the novel. Midway during the decade, amateur stage companies and play production outside campuses began to be more frequent and more easily accessible cultural fare. It was then that a crucial shortcoming of English-language plays became more obvious. Actors mouthing lines of Filipino characters in English show up incongruities in the culture of playwriting and the culture of day-to-day living and disjunctions between what we see and what we hear. As long as we encounter characters only on the printed page, the incongruities and disjunctions do not exist. But once our encounter with them takes place onstage, in the theater, the incongruities and disjunctions crowd out our willingness to believe and to feel.