

## FORUM KRITIKA: PHILIPPINE THEATER AND MARTIAL LAW

### CROSSING BORDERS: PHILIPPINE ACTIVIST THEATER AND MARTIAL LAW

**Bonifacio P. Ilagan**  
*sapapiph@yahoo.com*

#### Abstract

Positing theater as political, this paper intends to locate activist theater in the context of the Philippine cultural setting and political milieu on the eve of the Martial Law declaration in 1972. It shall illustrate why this kind of theater, frowned upon by some sectors in the artistic community, had taken unto itself the task of redefining the stage and employing it in a political mass movement that ultimately blazed a trail in Philippine theater and also challenged the socioeconomic structures of society. This paper integrates the theory and practice of the activist theater in the Philippines in the late 1960s until the initial years of Martial Law from the point of view of a direct participant.

#### About the author

Bonifacio P. Ilagan started out as a member of Wilfrido Ma. Guerrero's University of the Philippines (UP) Mobile Theater in 1968 and ended up founding Panday Sining, one of the three pioneer theater groups of the activist movement which President Marcos cited as a major security threat and reason for imposing Martial Law in the Philippines on September 21, 1971. After two stints as a political detainee in 1974 and 1994, Ilagan has stayed on in his unintentional theater career as playwright and director. He also writes for the cinema and directs video productions.

May I ask you to bear with me as I start this presentation with a homage to the fallen members of the Philippine activist theater, circa 1970s. There are too many of them to cite individually just now. But let me mention, in particular:

- Merardo Arce – architecture student, killed in a military checkpoint in Cebu on February 5, 1985; he was 31;
- Leo Alto – pre-medicine student, killed in an encounter with government soldiers on August 1, 1975, in Zamboanga del Sur; he was 23;
- Romulo Palabay – marketing student, abducted by paramilitary forces in Hungduan, Ifugao on December 14, 1974; three days later, he was found riddled with bullets and a shattered skull; he was 22;
- Armando Palabay, Romy's younger brother – economics student, killed in an encounter with the military in Sillapadan, Abra on November 27, 1974; he was 21; and

- Rizalina Ilagan, my younger sister – agriculture student, abducted in late July 1976 in Makati by intelligence operatives of a special licensed-to-kill group called Ground Team 205; she was 23; she remains missing to date (Ground Team 205 was a composite band of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Military Intelligence Group/ Intelligence Service of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, 2<sup>nd</sup> Constabulary Security Unit, and 231<sup>st</sup> Constabulary Company directly commanded by Col. Alejandro Gallido who was even promoted to general during the term of President Cory Aquino).

All five belonged to Panday Sining, an activist theater group that I helped found and chaired in 1970. At that time, we were more conscious about our being activist, rather than being theater.

We didn't even realize that we were revisiting an unprecedented phenomenon during the turn of the last century. Professor Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio wrote a book about it, *The "Seditious" Tagalog Playwrights: Early American Occupation*. It told of how Juan Matapang Cruz, Aurelio Tolentino, Juan Abad, and other artists employed theater as a way of resisting US invasion at a time that the rifles of the Aguinaldo revolutionary army had already fallen silent, and the US was already conducting a war of "pacification" in these islands. This period in Philippine theater is also chronicled in the book *The Filipino Drama* by Arthur Stanley Riggs.

I don't remember encountering the word "activist" in these books. Cruz, Tolentino, Abad, and company were not described as such, but were instead variously called *insurrectos*, rebels, outlaws. "Activist" became popular as an aftermath of the First Quarter Storm of 1970. But I daresay that the theater artists of that bygone era were activists of the first order.

"Activism" is often used synonymously with protest or dissent. That could very well be the reason why activists are perceived to be belligerents. If you have wondered why not a few look at activists in an unpleasant light, shrugged them off as hostile characters, or simply shrugged them off—period, that could be the reason. But an activist, if we may need a generic definition, is one who consciously does things to bring about change. And the desire for change is at the root of activism.

In 1968, when I entered the University of the Philippines in Diliman, change was the battle cry of the resurgent activist movement. It was, however, written out and shouted out in a loaded, belligerent slogan: "Down with US imperialism, domestic feudalism, and bureaucrat-capitalism!" It meant changing the entire sociopolitical and economic system that had become the Philippines since the coming of the naval fleet of Commodore George

Dewey in 1898. Our politics and economy were lorded over by the US, notwithstanding Philippine independence, and that equated with US imperialism. The countryside was lorded over by a landed aristocracy that had been entrenched all throughout the centuries of Spanish rule, and largely preserved by the US, and that was domestic feudalism. Those who controlled commerce and industry and agriculture were also those who competed and won in the elections, and therefore ran the whole caboodle of government—read: bureaucrat-capitalism.

The activists translated the slogan against the three -isms in terms of the burning issues of the day: unemployment, unjust wages, landless peasants, elite rule and misgovernance, graft and corruption, lack of social services, miseducation, moral decay, etc. All these meant there had to be c-h-a-n-g-e.

I listened to what the activists were saying, but safely stayed on the fringes. Like most of the students of the time, I had a personal dream that ran counter to the activist agenda. I wanted to go to law school right after my political science course. At the same time, I was more interested in joining the University of the Philippines (UP) Mobile Theater of Wilfrido Maria Guerrero, which I did.

One day, I mustered enough courage and knocked at his office door. I told him I wished to be a member. He asked me if I had any theater experience. Of course I had. In high school, I proudly mentioned, I played second male lead in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Freddie let me read some lines in a script, which was his famous *Wanted: A Chaperon*. Then he said, “Stop already. You are in. Memorize the lines.” I asked, “Which lines, sir?” He growled at me. “The Muchacho’s [boy servant], what else?”

Thanks to Guerrero’s theater group, I had my first taste of performing in urban poor communities where people gathered around us and followed us like we were some stars. But Guerrero’s plays had to be translated in the native language, otherwise our audiences would not appreciate his satire and comedies of error. In a language that they understood, the common folk never failed to laugh at Guerrero’s masters and ladies of the house, butlers and servants—little knowing that they were laughing at themselves.

While not exactly activist, the UP Mobile Theater was a big leap from the traditional notion of theater legitimacy. Colonial values had impressed upon Filipinos that theater could only be legitimate when performed in prestigious venues, couched in “respectable” language, and that means to say, written in English. This artistic valuation cast aside theater by indigenous artists. If native stuff was theater at all, it was of the lesser kind. But the most noteworthy accreditation of legitimate theater was that it hewed closely to the sociopolitical norms and beliefs that reinforced the status quo.

*Rizalina,  
the author's younger sister,  
was a high school student in  
1970 when she joined the  
radical youth organization  
Kabataang Makabayan  
(Nationalist Youth)*



*The author today holding the  
picture of his sister Rizalina*

This is not to say that I knew about the colonial stuff in the UP Mobile Theater, no. I came to know about it when I became an activist. Like most of my generation, activism slowly but surely drew me in. My decision to become one happened as soon as I received one blow of a truncheon dealt by a riot police. The fascism and police brutality that the activists harped on became one real experience for me. I joined the Student Cultural Association of the UP and the Kabataang Makabayan (KM). I was crossing a border.

The stirrings of a new consciousness, the rising activism in the campus that charged the social system for the cycle of poverty and corruption victimizing the people rang louder. In the series of education sessions outside the classrooms, I learned to indict the ruling elite and its foreign patrons as the perpetrators of poverty, inequality, and injustice, as well as the beneficiaries of corruption. I understood why Filipino nationalism had to be aggressive, had to get hold of our national identity and the essence, not the mere trappings of democracy.

Informed that I was a member of the UP Mobile Theater, the activist leaders gave me a special task. I had to help put up a play for an upcoming big event. It was fine that someone came to be our director. The only thing missing was the play. I had to write one even if I didn't know how. I also gathered the actors. On hindsight, we were a resounding success not because we were good, but because we were largely a novelty.

The KM, even if it was already a formidable organization at that time, didn't have a cultural arm, or a theater group. Our one-time director had left, and so the task fell upon me. The good thing was that I had a ready membership, which was the chapter of KM in UP Diliman, including those whom I mentioned at the beginning, save for my sister who

was studying in UP Los Baños. Among these wide-eyed theater wannabees, nobody was taking up a course that was even remotely associated with theater. The news about our theater in-the-making spread fast. KM members from other schools joined us.

On account of our maiden performance, invitations started coming in. We performed the play, which I remember was called *Sinipi sa Buhay*, many times over. Here was a movement hungry for theater. Here was a cause waiting to be told, to be rendered in paint and canvass, to be sung, to be dramatized.

At first, we were a motley band of student activists whose only asset was a fierce commitment to militant nationalism and revolutionary social change. Then, someone by the name of Leo Rimando joined us – and that made a whole world of a difference. Leo was not just a name. He was, together with Tony Mabesa and Edgar de la Cruz, an institution in theater in UP Los Baños. No matter that his theater was thoroughly bourgeois, when he joined us, we were already an out and out KM. The chemistry was enough to start a theater movement that eventually challenged and upset the theater of the status quo in the Philippines. Soon enough, we had a name for our theater group: Panday Sining, or as Ninotska Rosca translated it, Artsmith. We were crossing another border.

Political will and a keen sense of the power of the medium drove us to learn theater through actual and urgent theater work, like learning warfare through warfare. For story ideas, characters, conflicts, themes, and premises, there were the struggles and aspirations of the ordinary men and women who ran the factories and nurtured the fields. They were no extraordinary people with superhuman traits. But without their labors, surely society would stand still. We found in them a rich and continuing source of dramatic materials.

To better draw from their lives, we lived with the people for whom we created drama. We learned from them, participated in their battles, shared in their dreams.

We performed wherever the people were. Our venues were the town squares, basketball courts, churchyards, streets, rice fields. It was, in that limited sense, like my former mobile theater. But while my mobile theater acted out funny pieces as an outreach program, activist theater did its thing as a way of life. Activist theater made the people laugh, too. But its greater import was its power to push the great unwashed and the multitude of the unlettered to get organized, and to inspire them to act on their plight.

And then, there was not just one theater group, but two, and three and so on. Shortly before the declaration of martial law, there were four major activist theater groups that observed no season of performances because what they did all year round was to produce plays. These were, aside from Panday Sining, Gintong Silahis, Tanghalang Bayan, and the earliest of the lot, Samahang Kamanyang.



Our members were no longer students alone, but out-of-school youths, office employees, workers, and peasants. In theater, these timid souls became empowered to speak out their mind and vision for a better life.

From skits and agit-props, activist theater graduated to one-act plays, then full-length plays and even musicales.

No rally or forum was complete without activist theater. At the outset, protest demonstrations featured activist plays as intermission numbers to break the monotony of lengthy speeches. In many cases, the people anticipated the intermission numbers more than the speeches.

With practice came the ability to raise experience to the level of knowledge. With knowledge, activist theater was able to theorize and to instruct and train its members systematically. A tool, which we called mass criticism, became an imperative. We also conducted a thoroughgoing assessment of our strengths and weaknesses after each performance.

We had crossed many borders.

It was a time to be bold and daring for a cause that became my generation's badge of courage. Like most of the youth activists of the time, the experience was all I needed to affirm for life a dictum: Against an intrinsically oppressive and exploitative system, to rebel is justified! And theater proved to be an excellent arena to dramatize rebellion.



*A familiar street march in 1970  
spearheaded by Kabataang Makabayan*



*Student and youth activists break through the security  
cordon and threaten to attack the presidential palace on  
January 30, 1970*



*Activist youth and students, including the author, mass up at the lobby of the old Congress of the Philippines in a rally in 1970*

Like the rest of the rebels of my generation, members of the activist theater were animated by three life-changing principles. First, to overcome reactionary or retrogressive attitude and the culture of subservience –“Makibaka, Huwag Matakot!” (“Struggle, Be Not Afraid!”). Second, to remold one’s self and achieve truthful and correct knowledge –“Mula sa Masa, Tungo sa Masa” (“From the Masses, to the Masses”). And third, to light up one’s path and find life’s meaning –“Paglingkuran ang Sambayanan” (“Serve the People”).

Nurtured by this nonartistic babble, some quarters tried to dismiss activist theater as nontheater and plain propaganda. We took it in stride because our audiences were telling us otherwise. Because, in the final analysis, what was not propaganda? What was not political? In a society in crisis, even the personal became acutely political.

The government took notice and monitored us. Increasingly, there were reports of harassment during rehearsals and performances. It became a common occurrence that the police or persons in authority would deny us access to performance areas. Or that the lights would suddenly go out when a play was in progress. Or that a play was interrupted by stone throwing and, sometimes, firing of guns.

The government did try to offset the impact of activist theater by putting up, every so often, glamorous theater productions that embodied “the true, the good, and the beautiful.” They had impact, but mostly contained in newspaper reviews that only urbanites read. The longer-lasting and farther-reaching impact was still the activist theater’s.

Eventually, there were arrests. These came in consonance with the increasing political turmoil. The situation was coming to a head. The government was losing arguments and was increasingly becoming shrill in its attacks on the activist movement as “a communist conspiracy.”

In 1971, President Ferdinand Marcos suspended the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus for one year. The act gave him extraordinary police powers. It was, obviously, a prelude to martial law.

On the eve of the martial law declaration, all activist cultural groups, including those in theater, literature, and the visual arts, formed an alliance to better coordinate their programs and secure their organizations. They called the formation *Konsehong Tagapag-uugnay ng Rebolusyonaryong Sining*, or Coordinating Council for Revolutionary Art.

Then, like a thief in the night, Marcos formalized his dictatorship with Proclamation Number 1081. All offices of all entities approximating opposition to Marcos were closed down. The military raided the headquarters of the activist artists.

In fact, Marcos had sown a singular fear across the land in September 1972. Prohibited by the constitution to run for a third term, his evil genius worked out a situation to justify martial law and perpetuate him and his family in power. That declaration gave him absolute authority, which he wielded in lightning fashion. Even before his spokesperson, Francisco Tatad, officially informed the public about the martial law edict, Marcos had already ordered the Armed Forces of the Philippines to arrest all leaders of the political opposition, including—and especially those—of the activist people's organizations.

Another border had to be crossed.

Our short-lived coordinating council helped in the transition from working aboveground to working underground. After the initial shock was over, activist actors tried to do what they called "lightning performances." These were done where people usually converged, like market places and churchyards. In a flash, a team of three to four activists acted out a scene that denounced the dictatorship and exhorted the people to reject and fight it. The experiment, however, proved too risky.

How to go around martial law became the burning question. Activist theater in Manila took up the challenge by forming a seemingly innocent group, which it named "Babaylan," a name for a local shaman. It revived the religious drama and folk rituals, infusing them with a running subtext to assail the dictatorship.

Meanwhile, the anti-dictatorship movement sounded the call for activists to work among the people in the countryside. Our artists' coordinating council formed small teams of three to five members who were writers, theater persons, and visual artists. They were sent among the peasants and the mountain folk to participate in the creation and development of a liberated and liberating culture.



To many among the city-bred activists, it was a difficult process of remolding and unlearning to survive and rise beyond the self. Not everybody withstood the test. But those who remained proved to be the best.

In that great exodus, countless activists went underground in cities and countryside to reinforce the resistance against the Marcos dictatorship, employing theater to arouse, organize, and mobilize the masses. In the process, an undetermined number were arrested, imprisoned, tortured, raped, and killed—including Leo Alto, Merardo Arce, the brothers Armando and Romulo Palabay, and my sister Rizalina.

They had shown that to activists of the people's revolutionary theater, no border, not martial law, not even the ultimate personal sacrifice, seemed impossible to cross.