

# The Drama of Search

by Ricardo Angeles

The Philippine cultural experience, from the migratory spawnings of the early Indo-Malay stocks and the eventual incursions of colonizers, presents a very interesting, multi-leveled setting on which the drama of documentation may be played. Its 400 years of colonial subjugation under three different cultures, i.e., Spanish, American and Japanese, has intruded into and altered the Filipino's experience of his "natural" cultural identity that one Jesuit scholar's remark on the perpetual inchoateness of Philippine literature has been applied to Philippine culture in general.

Likened to a sprouting flower, Philippine culture, nipped in the bud, was never allowed to bloom, only to be re-planted and cut once again. This "perpetual inchoateness" makes the task of documentation acute for the Filipinos. To this inchoateness, add the ephemerality of the performing arts and you have a problem of conflict, in documentation at least, that may be aptly termed the drama of search - the search for the residue.

For Philippine drama, the residue of Philippine traditional theatre is neither the evidence nor the witness of what earlier Philippine traditional theater was.

Scholars, considering printed text in form as the only legitimate residue of theater, can trace only as far back as the 16th century, 1598 to be exact, the date of the first verifiable play performed in the Philippines during the early part of the Spanish regime in the islands. W.E. Retana noted that the play was written by a Jesuit and presented in honor of the first bishop of the Diocese of Cebu, Fr. Pedro de Agurto. The first play written in a Philippine dialect was also written by a Jesuit. This play, which was performed in Bohol by Filipino actors and actresses in 1609, was a dramatization of the martyrdom of Santa Barbara.

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The better-known dramatic forms, i.e., the *cenaculo* or passion play, the *comedia* or *moro-moro*, the *carillo* or shadow-puppet theater, the *karagatan*, *duplo*, *balagtasán*, and the *zarzuela*, are not indigenous. The *cenaculo*, depicting the story of redemption, from the creation of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was instituted by the Spaniards as a religious drama. The *moro-moro* was initially staged to celebrate the conquest of Mindanao by Governor Corcuera in 1637. Navarro de Peralta, who built his puppet theater on Magdalena street in Manila, introduced the first native shadow plays called the *carillo* with the presentation of romantic stories including Zorrilla's Don Juan Tenorio in 1870. Even the Tagalog debates, i.e., *karagatan*, the *duplo* and the *balagtasán*, had their roots in the Spanish debates which according to Dr. Maximo Newman in his Dictionary of Spanish Literature had their origin in Latin, Provincial and French poetry eventually becoming a stock device in European literature. The *zarzuela* derived its name, according to Phyllis Hartnell, from the royal shooting lodge near Madrid where such diversions were the favorite amusement of Isabella's royal husband, King Philip IV. Needless to say, Philippine dramatists, e.g., Manuel Xeres-Burgos, Severino Reyes, Juan Abad, Aurelio Tolentino to name a few, made very good use of these dramatic forms utilizing them to serve their specific needs and, as Prof. Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio attests to in her book, "The Seditious Tagalog Playwrights: Early American Occupation," even turning them into tools of resistance against colonizers.

This does not mean that there was no native theater before the arrival of the Spaniards. It simply means the native theater was pre-empted by the new forms introduced and therefore did not have the opportunity to flourish into dominant dramatic forms because, unlike that of the Occidental theater, native theater did not place emphasis on the written dialogue as basis for the action, hence no tangible record or residue was left.

If we consider the two elements of drama, i.e., action and language as residue, the more the deviation becomes apparent—action depicts gestures that are either Spanish or American; language displays shifting dictions of Spanish and American—

English. Though there has been a militant move towards nationalism and Filipinization, contemporary drama is neither comforting nor assuring because in place of the old dramatic forms like the zarzuela and the rest, it now bandies about more immediate and intellectually palatable ones that are shades of the absurd theater, the minimal theater, Russian realism and the like. But once again, it would be worthwhile to point out that contemporary Philippine drama, in the context of the Filipino's aspiration for cultural respectability, is now more relevant as it begins to assert the use of Pilipino as a language.

The issue of residue has been brought up in order to highlight the fact that due to the massive influx of influences and acculturation, which persists up to the present through the newer media technologies, Philippine drama has not really established a strong and stable footing to earn the rightful term, traditional.

Dance-drama, for that matter, at best is innovative rather than traditional. The **Rama-Hari** of the CCP Dance Company is a contemporary Filipino interpretation of the Ramayana. The **Kalinga** of the Folk Arts Theater is the transliteration of the Kalinga epic form *Ullalim*. Though employing gestures, movements and colors inspired by the authentic Kalinga, it is nevertheless, a

modern-day interpretation of the Kalinga's oral tradition.

The dance-drama form is still at its experimentation stage and the number of groups of dance companies occasionally employing it are few. We may cite the Cultural Center of the Philippines Dance Company with *Tales of the Manuvu* (1980), *Rama-Hari* (1982), *Amada* (1970), *Itim Asu* (1970), *Sisa* (1978); the Folk Arts Theater with their *Alamat* (Legend) Series: "*Daragang Magayon*" (1975), "*Kalinga*" (1980), "*Munahan at Isara*" (1981), "*Reyna Elena*" (1982); the Sining Kambayoka of the Mindanao State University with their adaptations of Muslim and non-Muslim legends into contemporary dance-drama.

It is apparent from the residue, therefore, that there is no clear line of continuity that may bind the contemporary with that of the traditional. This may spell the difference in the objectives of documentation: while the role of tradition for most is simply reinforcing, the role of tradition for Filipinos is identifying; while "existing traditions" for most are "adaptations of earlier traditions", for us these are trans-plantations from other traditions; while culture for most is traditional, culture for us is innovative; and while the objective of documentation for most is to preserve, we document to discover.



*The Mansaka Tribe from Davao, Philippines, performs the Paballung dance.*