

Drama of the Emerald Isles

by Nicanor G. Tiongson

As a river is the confluence of many streams, so contemporary Philippine theatre is the consequence of many cultural traditions and historical influences. The forms of Philippine drama that co-exist today among the different peoples of the Philippines may be divided into: 1) the indigenous forms, principally the rituals and mimetic dances; 2) the Hispanized plays, which include the *komedya*, the *sinakulo* and the religious playlets; 3) the America-influenced dramas, as exemplified by the drama and *sarsuwela* as well as *bodabil* and the "legitimate" plays; and 4) the contemporary modern plays, as typified by works of realism and expressionism and dramas that revitalize traditional forms.

THE INDIGENOUS FORMS

The rituals and dances of early Filipino tribes which imitate actions taken from real life, were held or performed together or separately on the various occasions of a person's birth, baptism, circumcision, initial menstruation, courtship, marriage, sickness, and death; or for the celebration of tribal activities like going to war, hunting, planting and harvesting rice.

In most rituals, a native shaman (called *catalonan* or *babaylan*) goes into a trance as the spirit he is calling upon possesses him and, while entranced, kills the sacrificial animal (a pig, chicken or carabao). This act, which represents the supplicant's death at the hands of god, adapts itself to the different occasions for which the ritual is held. Among the *Zambals* (1680), the baptism of a child is done in honour of the god *Malyari*. First, the shaman kills the animal prepared by the child's parents. Then, amidst the chanting of the child's relatives, he dresses the child in his best clothes, unravels his long hair, and ornaments its fringes with pieces of gold (wishing the child prosperity in life). He then pours the blood of the sacrificial animal on the child (symbolizing the offering of the child's life), and then proceeds to cut the child's gold-embellished hair to throw to an eager audience (reminding the child that his prosperity must be shared with the tribe).

Indigenous dances are even more clearly imitative of real actions. The *Igorots* of the north have a dance that re-enacts the hunt for and the killing of a boar, as well as the practice and ways of headhunting; the *Negritos* of *Zambales* have a dance



"Larawan" written by Nick Joaquin and

which shows the techniques of gathering wild honey in the forest. The *Tausogs* of the south have dances that represent how oranges are picked, how not to catch a mudfish, how butterflies make love. The most important dance, however, among most Philippine tribes is the war dance. In *Sulu*, two English travellers of the 18th century describe how, in the celebration for the circumcision of boys in the tribe, each man in a huge circle of warriors displays his fighting prowess before the newly-circumcised boys. Each warrior displays all the many ways of fighting with broad sword and spear, and later, with *kris* and shield against an imaginary enemy.



performed by the Tanghalang Pilipino.

As a whole, the rituals and dances of early Filipinos reflect the physical and "metaphysical" culture of early Philippine tribes -- their manners of dressing, hunting, fighting in war, courting a girl, catching a mudfish and picking oranges. Furthermore, these dramatic forms fulfill the most basic needs of the tribes. Rituals ensure food for the tribe, cure the sick, and assure the well-being of newly-born children or new-wed couples, while most of the dances answer the dual need for entertainment and education. Through these dances the young learn all the duties that will fall on them as younger members of the tribe -- fighting,

hunting and food-gathering for boys, picking oranges (among others) for girls, and making love for both. Lastly, these protodramas work for the collective good because they re-enforce the social harmony and unity as well as the survival of the tribe. Rituals of baptism, circumcision, marriage, as well as dances that instruct children, seek to draw an individual into the life of the tribe. The dances that instruct children on the techniques of picking oranges or catching mudfish or fighting in war, clearly work for a good harvest and plentiful fruits and fish. Finally, the display of war dances teaches the newly-circumcised boy the primary

duty of manhood, i.e., fighting to ensure the survival of the tribe against all aggressors.

THE HISPANIZED PLAYS

The Spanish regime from 1521 to 1898 saw the rise and popularization of various types of secular and religious drama, the former usually staged to celebrate town fiestas, and the latter, to highlight the importance of Catholic liturgical feasts or seasons, like Christmas, Lent or Easter.

Of the secular dramas, the most important and popular was the *komedya*, a play in verse, performed for many nights. This theatrical spectacle includes elaborate marches, lengthy choreographed fighting between individuals or armies, or between princes and princesses in male disguise, lions, highwaymen and giants, and magical artifices for the "miracles" wrought by heaven to save Christians in distress.

Deriving stories from the native versions of European metrical romances, *komedya* scripts usually depict the conflict between the Christian and Moorish kingdoms of Medieval Europe, and/or the love between Christian princes and princesses, and their Moorish counterparts. Typical of these fiesta plays is the popular "*Comedia de Atamante Y Minopla*" (1844), whose story revolves around the widower, King Lodemonte of Verona, whose blind love for Duchess Luandra drives him to have the infant Crown Prince Atamante killed, and to order the marriage of his sister, Florinda, to Luandra's accomplice, Daciano. But Florinda loves only the principled General Aristipo, and Atamante is rescued from the forest and raised by a shepherd. Soon after, Luandra gives birth to Prince Minopla, who later decides to look for his half-brother Atamante. In his absence, the Turkish Moors occupy Verona, to avenge the death of their

General, but in no time, General Aristipo reconquers Verona.

Meanwhile, the Emperor of Turkey has called a tournament to find a suitable husband for his daughter Laudamia. Minople wins but is challenged by Atamante. Not recognizing each other, the two fight savagely. Atamante kills Minople, but finds out later that he has killed his brother. Laudamia consoles Atamante, and the two lovers flee from Turkey and bring the news of Minople's death to Verona. Luandra dies. The Turks attack Verona to rescue Laudamia from her "abductor". Atamante leads Verona's army to victory over the invaders. The remaining Moors are baptized, Atamante and Laudamia are married, and finally rule as the new King and Queen of Verona.

As popular but more numerous than the komedyas are the religious playlets and dramas, which attest to the importance of Catholicism to Spain's colonial rule. Many religious playlets in the Philippines merely augment the Catholic liturgy or dramatize more fully the feasts and events narrated by the liturgy. The "Panunuluyan" reenacts the search for an inn by Mary and Joseph on Christmas eve, while the "Pastores" and "Tatlong Hari" dramatize the adoration of the Christ Child by the shepherds and the three kings, respectively. The "Osana" depicts Christ's entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, just as the "Via Crucis" and "Siete Palabras" recall the carrying of the cross and the crucifixion of Christ, respectively. The "Easter Sunday Salubong," on the other hand, dramatizes the meeting of the Risen Christ and his grieving Mother Mary in Galilee, while the "Moriones" narrates the story of Longinos, the Roman Soldier who was beheaded for believing in Christ's resurrection.

Full-blown religious plays include

the "Tibag" which focuses on the search by Helena and Constantine for the true cross of Christ, and the obstacles they encountered and overcame during that search -- mainly Moors and Jews who wanted to suppress Christianity; and the "Komedyas de Santo," like Iligan's "Comedia de San Miguel" (1890) which narrates, in charming episodes, Luzbel's rebellion against God, St. Michael's punitive attack on the rebels, the fall of the angels into hell, and the unleashing of the seven grotesque capital sins of the world.

Of the Philippine religious dramas, however, the most outstanding and enduring has been the "Sinakulo," staged during Lent and often for eight consecutive nights during Holy Week. The sinakulo started as the dramatization of the "Pasyong Genesis," the most popular verse narrative on the life and sufferings of Jesus Christ, later augmented by apocryphal stories from other pasyons and religious books like the "Martir sa Golgota". Conventions of the form include marches, chants and artificios for miracles. As in the komedyas, there are two distinct camps in the sinakulo. All the holy people (*banal*), led by Christ and the Virgin, chant their lines in a lachrymose manner, walk to the beat of a funeral march, move and gesture with anemic meekness, and respond to injustice with submissive tears. All the bad people (*hudyos*), on the other hand, practically spit out their lines in a crisp and harsh chant, march pompously into and out of the scene to a double-step march, and saw the air with numerous gestures that are as vigorous as they are obnoxious. As in the komedyas, however, Christ rises in glorious victory over the forces of darkness and his followers watch him and his mother ascend into heaven in triumph.

The plays introduced by Spain

represent a drastic departure from indigenous forms in subject matter, function and orientation. First, the komedyas presented European princes and princesses from European kingdoms of long ago, while the sinakulos depicted the life and sufferings of Christ, a story imported from Europe which at that time had absolutely nothing to do with the country's culture. Second, the komedyas gave the "Indios" a chance to escape from the travails of his real world, into an ideal world peopled by a "beautiful" white race whom God always showered with victories, while the sinakulo dished out superstitious miracles to them and made them believe in the myth that the good so easily triumphs over all evil, simply because it is good. Last, the komedyas propagated the Spaniards as the superior race, and taught blind obedience to the monarchy and its hierarchy of authority and hate for the Muslims of Southern Philippines. The sinakulo, on the other hand, shaped a colonial will, which made the Indios accept all the sufferings in this life -- mainly those dealt to him by the friars and Spaniards -- all in "imitation" of the meek and suffering Christ and in the hope that all those who suffer on this earth will be rewarded in the kingdom of heaven.

THE AMERICAN-INFLUENCED DRAMAS

The drama and the *sarsuwela*, the two most popular drama forms during the first two of the three decades of the American regime, were first introduced into the country by Spanish theatre groups in the last decades of the 19th century. Spanish as they were in origin, these plays could not help but be reshaped by Filipino playwrights, according to the temper and needs of the early American period.



“Ang Taong Yungib ng Peking (Peking Man)” written by Cao Yu, translated and performed by the Tanghalang Pilipino.

Of all the theatre forms witnessed in the country, the drama is probably the most versatile and protean. It could be written in verse, in prose or in both verse and prose. It could have one, two, or three acts, and could be called various names, depending on what its subject matter emphasized (*lirico, romantico, historico, social*, etc). Whatever its form, however, it presented an aspect of Filipino life, culture, history, and even topical issues, on stage. Of the many types of dramas, two stand out as the most important: the *drama simboliko* or revolutionary dramas of 1898-1906, and the romantic dramas that have risen in popularity throughout this century.

The revolutionary dramas of the turn of the century, written by nationalist playwrights like Aurelio

Tolentino, Juan Abad and Juan Matapang Cruz, were labelled “seditious” by the Americans because these plays exposed, attacked, and exhorted Filipinos to fight the colonization of the country by America. Using an elaborate system of symbols and allegories and “harmless” love stories to mask anti-American messages, these dramas were staged in Manila and its neighboring provinces in hundreds of performances. Often, playwrights and actors were arrested, by Americans during these performances, imprisoned and charged with sedition.

Typical of these plays is Juan Abad’s “*Tanikalang Ginto*” (Golden Chain). In this 1902 play, Liwanag or light (symbol of the country) wants to wed her sweetheart K’Ulayaw (Revolutionary Filipinos). But Liwanag’s

uncle, Maimbot or Greedy (the U.S.A.) refuses to give his consent to the marriage (independence). He bribes Liwanag with a golden bracelet (America’s initial promise of help against Spain); but Liwanag prefers K’Ulayaw’s gift of a handkerchief (a miniature revolutionary flag). In anger, Maimbot chains Liwanag to a tree and pays K’Ulayaw’s own brother, Nagtapon, to guard Liwanag. Nagtapon’s conscience bothers him, but when K’Ulayaw comes to rescue Liwanag, Nagtapon shoots his own brother dead. However, Diwa or Spirit (the spirit of struggle) comes down in a huge bubble and takes away Liwanag with her, with the promise that in the future Liwanag would be married to K’Ulayaw who would also be resurrected. The play ends with death and the devil dragging Maimbot

and Nagtapon to hell.

As more and more Filipinos began to accept American rule, the revolutionary dramas slowly disappeared and the more "safe", if superficial, romantic dramas rose and reigned for the next decades. Typical of these dramas is "Esperanza," written in 1916 by Jose Ma. Rivera. Esperanza, a dancer-for-hire in the Sta. Ana Cabaret, meets a customer, Artemio, with whom she falls in love. Artemio, the scion of a rich family, is also infatuated with Esperanza and proposes marriage to her. Artemio's parents refuse to bless the marriage and disown their son but he goes on anyway and marries the "loose" woman. As the play opens, the sick Artemio goes to the doctor and leaves Esperanza in the house washing clothes to earn their keep. A former cabaret customer entices Esperanza back to Sta. Ana but Esperanza fights off his offers of a "good" life. Delfin, a friend, arrives to announce that Artemio's parents are coming because they found out that he was sick. Upon seeing Artemio, the parents take pity on their son and forgive him, but still cannot accept Esperanza. Just then, a knock is heard on the door and in comes a lawyer who announces that Esperanza is the sole heiress of a wealthy relative who had just died. To show her golden heart, Esperanza donates half of her fortune to an orphanage, thus proving to all that even a woman like her can mend her "common" ways.

Together with these romantic dramas, the sarsuwelas had their heyday in the '20s and '30s. Usually in three-acts, with music and dancing interspersed within the prose dialogue, sarsuwelas often focus on a love story between members of the upper classes, spiced up with comic love episodes between servants, and made more relevant with satirical attacks on

usurers, Americanized Filipinos, corrupt politicians, and lazy husbands whose husbandry are wasted on cockfighting and other vices. In "Paglipas ng Dilim" (1902), Precioso Palma tells the story of Ricardo, a young doctor who is in love with Estrella, a modest, retiring seamstress. The "modern" and aggressive Caridad tries desperately to catch the handsome doctor, and succeeds at first in misrepresenting Ricardo to his beloved. In the end, however, all misunderstandings are cleared up and the doctor and his seamstress plan to get married as everyone sings "Paglipas ng Dilim" (After the Darkness).

The revolutionary dramas of the 1900s represent an important breakthrough in the development of Philippine theatre. Dramas, like "Tanikalang Ginto", faithfully reflect the material and "metaphysical" culture of Filipinos in costumes, sets, dialogues and situations; and more than this, present, in allegory, the struggle between the Filipinos and their American colonizers, and the reprehensible collaboration of rich Filipinos with the Americans in the first decade. Furthermore, these plays answered the urgent needs, not of a few, but of the majority of the Filipinos, to explain the implications of America's presence in the country and to exhort Filipinos to fight or support those who were still fighting in the mountains. Clearly these revolutionary plays worked for the fervent desire of the basic masses to liberate themselves from the yoke of foreign colonialism. Here, indeed, is Philippine drama at its meaningful best.

The romantic dramas and sarsuwelas too represent a significant development of the Spanish regime plays, if only because they already mirror Filipino life and culture. Using Filipino costumes, dialogues, situations and sets, most of these plays

succeeded in reflecting the basic contradictions in Philippine society, e.g., the conflict between the traditional and modern cultures, or between the landlords and peasants.

Meaningful too, are the needs these plays fulfilled. While it is true that these plays degenerated into pure entertainment as the decades wore on, still in their heyday, the dramas and sarsuwelas were an effective vehicle of social criticism for the people. Through them, playwrights launched diatribes against usurers, against Filipinos with colonial mentality, against men who did nothing but drink and smoke and caress their fighting cocks, and most of all, against rich Dons and Donyas who looked down on the poor. No wonder then, the masses supported these presentations.

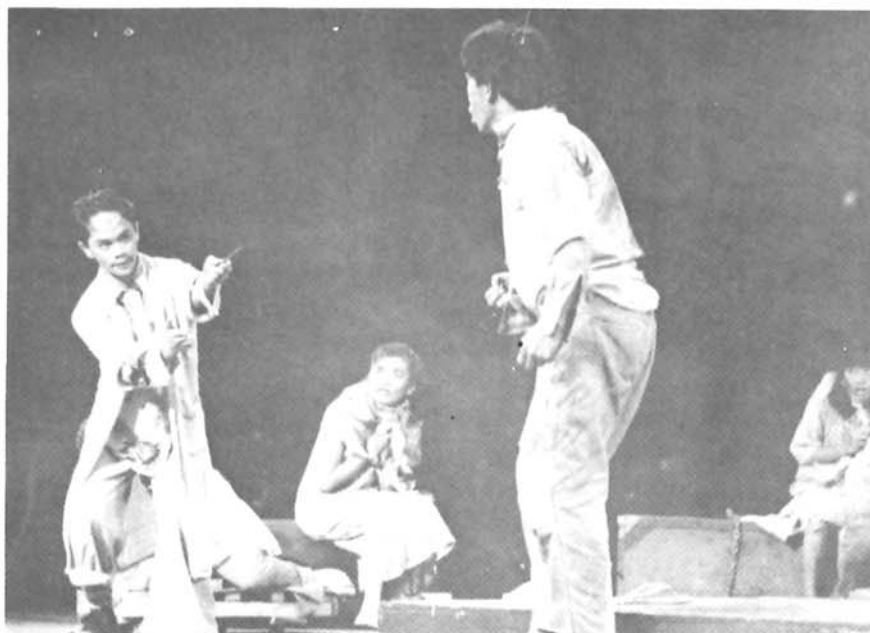
But the fact that the masses supported and continued to support these plays is no guarantee that these plays redound to the benefit of the masses. For while most romantic dramas and sarsuwelas do present a realistic picture of the conflict between rich and poor in society, they usually analyze and solve these problems in a most unrealistic fashion. In these plays, usurers always relent in the end, colonial mentality is exposed and eradicated, cockfighters and drunkards mend their ways, and the rich parents accept a poor or "loose" woman as a daughter-in-law -- as easily as Christ worked miracles in the komedya and the sinakulo to favour the good. Playwrights employ obvious coincidences, blatant accidents, and other such *die ex machina* in order to achieve a correct (not necessarily happy) ending for all concerned. Thus, they do give rise to false hopes among the masses who are led to believe that the status quo is good after all, and are blinded to the bitter ending of such stories in real life.

In the field of drama, the Americans brought two important types to the Philippines: the bodabil or stage show and the so called "legitimate" plays. Of these two, the stage show was more popular and hence, more effective.

In the first decades, bodabil songs and dances served as intermission numbers to circus animal acts or to the afternoon showings of the *cinematographo*. In 1921, however, Luis Borromeo came back to the Philippines from Las Vegas, and started his own full-fledged bodabil group, which performed at the Savoy, Realto and Sta. Cruz Theatre. The show caught on. More troupes were formed and these, together with American movies, succeeded in finally banishing the sarsuwela from the Manila stage. During the Japanese occupation, bodabil appended the romantic drama as one of its highlights. Thus was born the stage show which has survived to our day.

The stage show is not a play but a potpourri of songs, dances, comedy skits, and romantic dramas. Bodabil songs, dances and many comedy skits are derived mainly from what is popular in America at any particular time. Inevitable, therefore, Filipinos who perform in the stage show consciously imitate and naturally end up as the "local versions" of the American originals. Thus, Diomedes Maturan became the Perry Como of the Philippines, Eddie Mesa, the local Elvis Presley, Victor Wood, the local Tom Jones, while Bayani Casimiro copied Fred Astaire's routines, and Canuplin was hailed as the Charlie Chaplin of the Philippines.

Through the westernized educational system established by the Americans, Filipinos were introduced to the first samples of "legitimate theatre in the Philippines". Broadly speaking,



"Ang Paglilitis ni Mang Serapio" written by Paul Dumol and performed by the Cebu Central Colleges - Barangay Kalubihan Theater Workshop Company.

"legitimate" plays are those which have so-called "artistic merit". Exclusive schools for the rich, which were steeped in "good" (read westernized) education, led in the production of Shakespeare in the '30s, until other groups picked up and presented contemporary western classics, in the original English or in English translation. Today, some theatre groups still mount Broadway plays, especially Neil Simon comedies and grand musicals like "Mame" and "My Fair Lady," while others continue to translate the "classics" of the western stage (Sophocles, Plautus, Shakespeare, Goldoni, Moliere, Ibsen, Chekov, Shaw, Wilde, Arbuzov) into Filipino, hoping thereby to "educate" the tastes of the masses. Still others have adapted plays like Bertolt Brecht's "Caucasian Chalk Circle" and "The Life of Galileo Galilei" because of their political messages.

In evaluating the stage show and the so-called "legitimate" plays

written by western playwrights, one is confronted with a phenomenon that is very much like the komedya. Like the komedya, the stage show and the western "legitimate" plays, presented in the country by Filipinos, contain nothing of Philippine life and culture in them. The stage show has Filipinos twisting their tongues to and gyrating like Elvis Presley or flexing their limbs in the air a la Fred Astaire. In the same vein "legitimate" plays have Filipinos faking Lawrence Olivier's accent to be convincing as Macbeth of Shylock, or adopting a New York Jewish accent to do justice to Neil Simon.

Like the komedya too, these plays entertain by transporting audiences into worlds that are far from real. Filipino masses who see the stage show are enticed into the American dreamland through songs, dances, comedy skits and production numbers on stage, while their richer countrymen who have been more steeped in western

culture, imagine themselves in New York or New Orleans, Elizabethan or Victorian England, involved in the issues and conflicts of these far-away places. Where the first audience gets its "kicks" from the show on stage, the literati get their catharsis from empathy with the characters of a Williams or Miller play. For a while the insights of these modern plays are certainly valid, they often are blunted and even rendered *inutile* for the Filipino audiences, who tend to situate these plays within the context of colonial culture in the Philippines, to the detriment of the reality they present.

Finally, because of their proven effectivity in Americanizing Filipinos, *bodabil* and "legitimate" plays certainly help to facilitate and make more palatable to the Filipinos America's economic presence in the Philippines. With the wide acceptance of American material culture among Filipinos, Filipinos have in fact started to think and feel like Americans. Thus, both

the mass-supported stage shows and the elite-sponsored presentations of "legitimate" plays help to perpetuate the economic dominations of the country by America, a domination Filipinos fought against vehemently at the turn of the century when their minds had not yet been captured by American culture.

THE CONTEMPORARY MODERN PLAYS

The rise of a Filipino national consciousness is the most significant development that affected Philippine culture in the decades after World War II. The 1950s witnessed the first attacks by Claro M. Recto on continued American presence in the Philippines even after political independence was given to the country in 1946. The 1960s saw the gradual politicizations of intellectuals who spearheaded the formation of the first nationalist organizations and

the first significant mass actions in the period. By the late '60s and early '70s, militant mass organizations of students, workers, and professionals were holding demos, teach-ins, discussion groups to mobilize everyone against "American imperialism, local feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism." The imposition of Martial Law in 1972 did not succeed in suppressing the growth of these mass movements.

All these developments necessarily gave rise to the nationalist consciousness, which assumed different and oftentimes conflicting ideological interpretations, but which underscored to all concerned Filipinos the necessity of searching for and/or forming a Filipino national identity in culture. Because of this, scholars began to study and analyze Filipino folk cultural forms which used to be snubbed as worthless and backward by their Americanized/educated predecessors. Teachers began to reorient academic curricula to Philippine subject matter and to a pro-Filipino orientation in education. Artists looked for matter and styles that would express or "catch" the "Filipino soul".

In the last endeavour, urbanized Filipino playwrights necessarily first attempted to utilize the literary styles or tendencies they imbibed from westernized schools -- mainly realism and expressionism. As they learned more and more about the theatrical tradition of their country and of Asia, they also began to experiment with traditional Filipino dramatic forms (*sarsuwelas*, *komedyas*, *sinakulos*) and with ancient Asian styles (*noh*, *kyogen*).

Encouraged by playwriting contests and, more important, responding to the need for plays of semi-professional groups and numerous community theatre groups, the contemporary modern Filipino



"Cyrano de Bergerac" written by Edmond Rostand, translated and performed by the Tanghalang Pilipino.

play was born as a distinct reality in the decade of the '60s.

Western realism, which seeks to move an audience through empathy with three-dimensional characters, has been adopted by Filipino playwrights, and now follow two tendencies: the psychological, which focuses on the problems of individuals; and the social, which situates and roots individual problems within the larger framework of a class society.

Outstanding psychological studies of character are first found in some English plays of the '40s and '50s, such as Wilfredo Ma. Guerrero's "The Forsaken House" (1940), which dramatizes the tragedy of a middle-class father, whose cruel and conservative authoritarianism drives his seven children to hate him, leave home, and destroy themselves, and Nick Joaquin's "A Portrait of the Artists as Filipino" (1952), which depicts the tragedy of two old maid sisters in the Spanish city of Intramuros, who are slowly being devoured by the new, growing commercialism and pragmatism under America, but who stubbornly cling to the genteel albeit impractical world of Hispanized culture.

Plays of social realism, on the other hand, present contemporary Filipino characters and situations. Raul Aguila's "In Dis Korner" (1977) dramatizes an episode in the life of a professional boxer, who comes back to the ring to save enough money to open a little store for his wife, but turns his back on victory to open a little store for his wife, but turns his back on victory to buck the system of "fixing" which exploits boxers like him. Nonilon Queano's "Alipato" (1975), on the other hand, tells of the tragedy of Bino, who, in his desire to lead his family out of the web of poverty and frustrations that is



"Sa North Diversion Road" written by Tony Perez and performed by the Tanghalang Pilipino.

Tondo, joins a gang of holduppers and is subsequently pursued and killed by the law. Finally, Rene Villanueva's "Entresuwelo" (1977) paints a portrait of the urban poor, whose dreams of a better life are dashed by the hard realities of construction work, prostitution, and electric water pumps of the rich.

Not all plays, however, could depict urban realities in such a straightforward fashion. Since social conditions in the Marcos years inhibited direct expression of protest, playwrights with social messages had to look for subject matters in historical characters and episodes, in order to comment on the present. Domingo Landicho's "Unang Alay" (1975) dramatizes the decision made by Andres Bonifacio and his wife, to sacrifice personal interest (as symbolized by their first child) to the greater good of the 1896 Revolution; Jose Dalisay's "Sagatang Lawin" (1978) tells of a real dilemma -- of commitment of non-involvement faced by a youth during the Japanese occupation.

Becoming even more popular than realism today are expressionistic styles which directly discuss social ideals, consciously destroying the illusion of theatrical reality, and employing mime, dance, songs, symbols, stylized sets, costumes and props, and almost anything that would clarify and intensify these ideas for its audience.

Probably because of the towering influence of Bertolt Brecht, the expressionistic play of the last decade derived most of its subject matter from folklore. One of the most powerful plays of the decade, "Maranatha" (1974), by Rudolfo Galenzoga contemporizes an old Lanao legend, about a stranger that saved the people of the lake kingdom from a predatory black bird, and about the slippers he threw into the lake before his departure which according to him were the only things that could save the people from the oppression of military forces that would plague the kingdom after his departure.

As in Brecht and because of censorship under the Marcos Regime, history likewise provides expressionism with problems and situations which illuminate the present. Lito Tiongson's "Walang-Kamatayang Buhay ni Juan de la Cruz Alyas.." (1976) significantly talks about the American imposition of martial law, curfew, zoning, reconcentration and torture of the Filipino "insurrectos" in 1902.

Sometimes, expressionistic plays discuss historical personages in a documentary style (complete with narration and slides of actual people and events). Al Santos' "Mayo 21" (1977) traces the life of Valentin de los Santos through three periods of struggle against colonial rule, in order to explain why Tatang was obsessed with freedom, and why he founded the *Lapiang Malaya*.

The branch of expressionism called absurdism, on the other hand, was used by a few young playwrights. Al Santos' "Ang Sistema ni Propesor Tuko" (1980), pokes fun at the authoritarian rule of a fascist professor, to comment on contemporary Philippine society.

Typical of the new inexpensive, portable and short plays called *dula-tula* (drama-poem), which were evolved for symposia or rallies are Jose Lacaba's "Ang Mga Kagilagilalas na Pakikipagsapalaran ni Juan de La Cruz" (1975), which narrates one day in the life of an ordinary Filipino, who realizes that wherever he may go, he has no real rights; and Rizalina Valencia's "Iskolar ng Bayan" (1975), which explains the issue of academic freedom and other local and national issues to the studentry of the University of the Philippines.

Finally, expressionistic plays as musical is represented by the rock musical. Featuring a band of rock singers and musicians on a separate

platform, and a group of dancer-actor-mimic-singers onstage, Al Santos-Joey Ayala's "Nuklevar!" (1983) features a series of songs, dances and slides that explain nuclear reaction, exposes the horrors unleashed by the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, depicts the present nuclear arms race between the U.S. and Russia, and finally attacks the establishment of the nuclear plant in the Philippines.

Some plays, however, combine both styles. A classic of contemporary Philippine dramaturgy, "Juan Tamban" (1979), focuses on an upper middle-class social worker, who gets politicized while studying her thesis subject, the street urchin Juan Tamban. In this play, Marilou Jacob uses a chorus as narrator and commentator, to string together a series of highly realistic and moving episodes.

With the recent realization among theatre scholars and critics that traditional forms of drama, still popular among the masses, should not only be studied but imbued as well with positive, contemporary messages, urban playwrights have used the traditional style for contemporary mass content and orientation.

The modern "Sinakulo" (1977) had the Virgin Mary as Inangbayan, and Christ as Indio, being judged by Anas (Spanish colonialism), Caipas (American imperialism), Herodes (Japanese imperialism) and Pilato (the local elite which served as puppets of these colonizers). Unlike the traditional Christ, however, the modern Christ takes up arms against and wins over his oppressors.

Similarly, the *sarsuwela* has been successfully updated by Amelia Lapena-Bonifacio in her "Ang Bundok" (1976), which shows the harassment of the Igorots by foreign speculators who wanted the gold in the Cordilleras, and the unity the

mountain men forged to fight their oppressors.

The "seditions", dramas of nationalist playwright Aurelio V. Tolentino, "Kahapon Ngayon at Bukas" (1903) and "Bagong Kristo" (1907) were revived and reinterpreted (1976 and 1977 respectively) to highlight the contemporary suppression of urban workers and the continuing dominance of American imperialism. A novel treatment of these "seditious" drama is seen in Rody Vera's "Isang Rihersal" (1982), which shows two schools of thought regarding the revival of these nationalist plays today -- one that would treat them as museum pieces to avoid political complications, and another that would reinterpret them completely in relation to urgent economic and political problems of today (even if it means political reprisal).

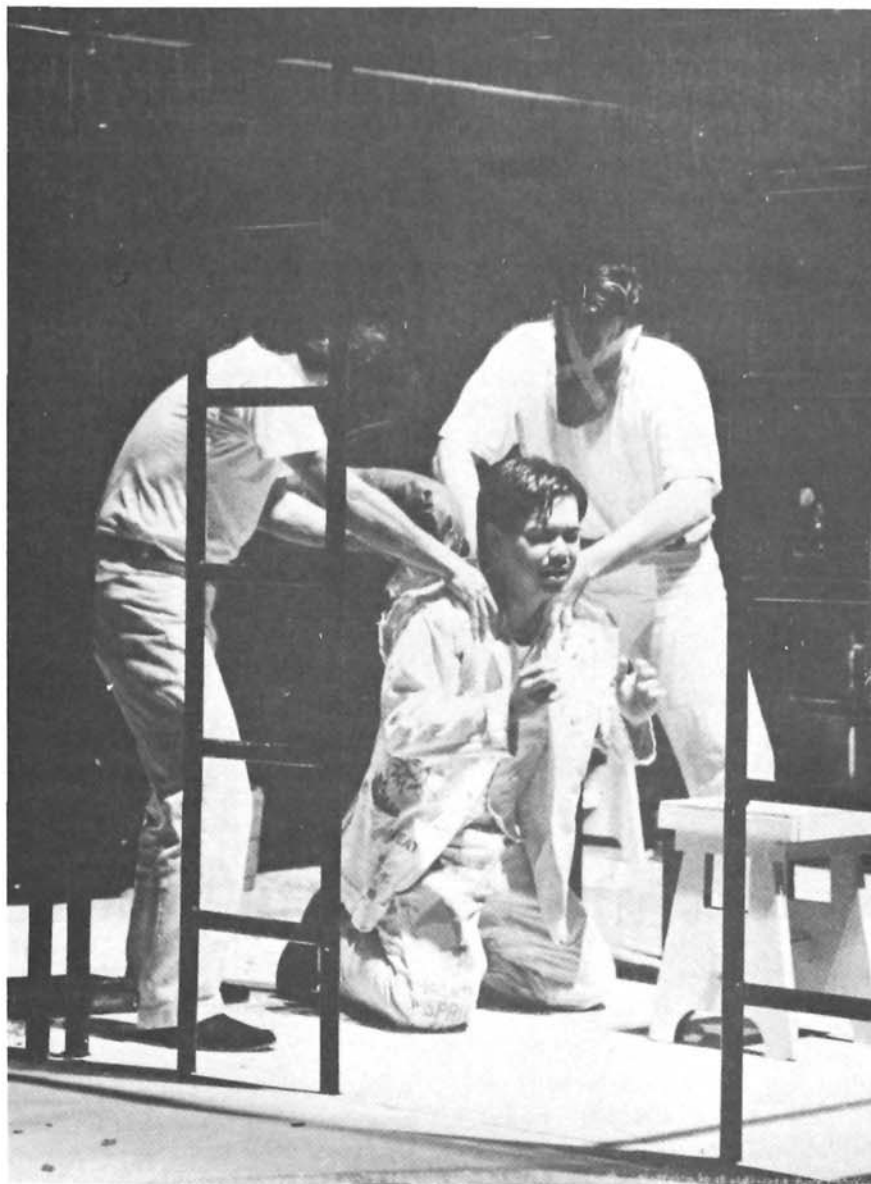
Finally, the oldest of all traditional dramas, the mass, was given new meaning in one of the most performed plays of the decade. "Pagsambang Bayan" (1977) by Bonifacio Ilagan, reinterprets Christ's sacrifice, the parables of the New Testament, and the priesthood according to the problems of the peasants and workers in our time.

Finally, because of the growing awareness among Filipino playwrights of other Asian theatre traditions, a few of them have experimented with Asian forms. Amelia Lapena Bonifacio's "Ang Paglalakbay ni Sisa" (1976) calls back from the dead the mad poor woman in Rizal's "Noli Me Tangere", who narrates in the ancient incantatory style of the Japanese Noh, the travails she underwent in life; while her "Ang Madyik na Sombrero" takes a picaresque Filipino character for a kyogen-style farce. Bonifacio had likewise pioneered in the use of various Asian

puppet traditions for her children's plays.

Today, Philippine theatre displays a vitality and urgency that surprises theatre enthusiasts of whatever persuasion. For one, it is undeniable that this kind of theatre has finally come into its own, at least as far as subject matter is concerned. An amazing range of characters, all painstakingly portrayed as individuals of types -- from salesgirls, peasants, factory workers to landed gentry and Ateneo basketball stars, from boxers and slum dwellers to social workers and theatre artists, from Andres Bonifacio to Balentin de los Santos --all move and speak in situations that always ring true. Urgent too are many of the issues that these plays speak about -- the danger of nuclear warfare, the exploitation of farmers by landlords, the desperation of salesgirls who turn their back on life to ensure a salary they can live on, the enlightenment of students and social workers about the world outside the academe, the massacre of nationalist organizations. Philippine theatre has finally come to fulfill the most basic expectation of a national theatre -- the faithful depiction of native reality.

As in Europe, many of these contemporary modern plays in the country today are written primarily as vehicles for the individual artist's personal expression of his unique, sometimes peculiar, view of reality. Using the various techniques of realism and expressionism, most contemporary playwrights fall under the banner of art-for-art's-sake. There are a few, however, who go beyond individual self-expression, who see theatre as the playwright's response to needs felt by the masses. These socially-committed writers create plays of social realism or expressionism to enlighten their audiences about the issues that concern the majority, and to move them



"Tonyo, Pepe at Pule" written by Jacob and performed by the Tanghalang Pilipino.

towards concerted action.

The faithful exposition of Philippine society effected by the contemporary realistic or expressionistic play goes a long way in creating a scientific view of society that can only redound to the benefit of the general Filipino audience. If such a scientific mentality does spread among the masses, it becomes a potent tool for analysis and weapon for change for the uneducated majority.

All told, plays of the contemporary period have already succeeded in faithfully portraying the myriad faces of Filipino life today, through the creative use of local and foreign traditions of theatre. When that theatre shall also have succeeded in advancing the interests of Filipino economic and political independence, then shall it have grown a little closer to the ideal of a Filipino national theatre. ■