Philippine Contemporary Drama, Its Growth and Chartings

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Philippine contemporary drama has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years as evidenced by the increasing financial viability of theater companies having their own regular programming and production seasons, such as PETA and Tanghalang Pilipino; the growth of campus theatre groups in Metro Manila and educational centers in the regions; and the rise of annual festivals of original and experimental plays, notably the Virgin Labfest of the Cultural Center of the Philippines. But because dramatic texts hardly land on bestseller lists, commercial publishers and even university presses have hardly taken notice, posing an obstacle to the wider dissemination of new and original dramatic texts. It is in that problematic context that this dramatic anthology is being published. As one of several collections of literary texts published to mark the fifth anniversary of the restoration of the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies, this drama anthology is significant for it contains original works for stage and cinema that provide a barometer of the directions being charted by Philippine drama.

"Patas," perhaps the most politically charged of the dramatic contributions here, may be the oldest in the writing. According to its author, Steve Patrick Fernandez, one of the leading dramatic voices of Mindanao, the text here has been "edited" from the original written way back in 1986. Set in Mindanao in the euphoric aftermath of the EDSA Revolution, the short play is an insider look at the groves of the academe, something rarely tackled on Philippine stage. Even more important, it tackles corrup-

tion in a state university and shows how state academics and educational bureaucrats, despite their august-sounding disciplines and titles, are not inured from the vices and gutter practices of cannibal politics. The two protagonists, Art and Lea, are faculty members and administrators in a state university in the South who, as the scene progresses, are disclosed to have been lovers and are in a particularly sensitive transition of their professional and personal lives. He's the assistant vice-president who has worked his way up by hook and by crook, and she's a lower-level functionary packing her bags for Manila where she will head the university's liaison office. Her promotion has come as a surprise to her lover, who's now trying to save himself from the change of administration as signaled by the arrival of an "attorney" from Manila, who's empowered to audit the university and recommend changes and new hiring. She's chummy with the new arrival, having fostered close relations with the official on her Manila missions that he himself has encouraged, if only for her to do his bidding, promote his interests, and further his closeness to the powers that be. But now that the old regime is fading, he's left grasping tenuously for his position and he's intrigued that she's positioned herself well in the new regime, suspecting that she's left him for a new lover. He will be proven correct, but that won't exempt him from a rude awakening and a withering emasculation.

"Kuwatrong Kuwadro" by Jose Victor Torres is a tender domestic drama about a broken family, and how the youngest daughter is able to live through the separation of her parents and bear the personal weaknesses of her absentee dad even right up to her wedding day. The play is well-structured and is framed quite literally through four pictures in the daughter's photo album representing key milestones in the life of the family. The mementos become guideposts that the daughter-narrator uses to tell the story of her dad's estrangement from his family, and how both sides struggle to touch base with one another and maintain the semblance of still being a family, even if the father has moved on to raise another one.

Its kilometric title, "Sa Isang Hindi Natatanging Umaga, at ang mga Ulap ay Dahan-dahang Pumaibabaw sa Nabubulok na Lungsod" by Allan B. Lopez , embodies the passage of time between an incipient affair involving a woman married to a very domineering husband and her officemate, and its waning as she decides to continue suffering the forbearance of a very unhappy marriage. By the stage directions alone, the reader learns the play's strategy: to chart the illicit affair's nascent beginning and eventual

languishment, but in an oblique manner that heavily depends on characterization, casual dialogue (sometimes too casual perhaps), and pregnant pauses.

Maynard Manansala's "Dalawang Gabi" likewise structures his drama around the passage of time that ensues in the relationship between a college teacher in her late thirties and her student who's been checking her test papers and appears to be courting her: the two nights in the title roughly refer to the night he announces he's leaving her for a girl his age, and the night two years later when he makes a surprise visit to the faculty room to find her checking the papers herself and appearing to have managed the separation well. Save for the interval between the two nights marked by a somewhat needless video documentary showing the romance between the boy and the girl she's left the teacher for, the drama is well-structured and entertaining. But one wonders how this basic May-December romance could have done on its own if shorn of its obvious influences from banal TV sitcoms and Star Cinema "romcoms," and without its rather insistent and even obsessive popular culture trivia references to Faith Hill's "If I'm Not In Love With You," Alma Moreno jokes, and Kris Aquino mannerisms.

Vlad Gonzales's "Si Nelson, Ang Nanay, ang Pancit Canton" is a smartly depicted drama about a mother-and-son relationship: from the city where he works as a visual artist, the protagonist son suddenly comes home to his small Laguna hometown and surprises his mother who proceeds to perform the usual maternal duty of preparing him something to eat, and, while at it, unintentionally nags him about a host of things, such as his decision not to take up biology in college, because if he had, he would have finished his medical studies by now, like the son of her old friend. He hides his irritation at her little insinuations; in any case he's too busy answering the cellphone that seems to keep on ringing and ringing. Meanwhile a host of people crisscross the room; they're wrapped in paper that appears to symbolize if not mimic his art medium—paper tole. The theater of the absurd becomes meta-theater as he asks his mother if she knows the rather spectral visitors. And she says she does: they're the people of his past, such as his school buddy with whom he had had a not-too-innocent affair, and his school teacher who molested him. His mother is not a simpleminded woman after all; she knows best, including his secrets; in fact, she's endowed his secrets with more than the three-dimensional decoup-

age of his art. Compared to hers, his art is paltry.

"Billboard" by Adrian Crisostomo Ho is a sociological comedy about urban folks' reaction to a road accident. Interestingly set around a giant billboard featuring the sexy body of Derek Ramsey nearly bereft of clothes, the action happens below and above it: below, a gaggle of characters—two young persons in silly banter as they conduct their silly courtship, a "balut" vendor, a Facebook addict, and an eager-beaver-though-ineffectual barangay captain—provides quite a contrast to the serious business above, where workmen Emong and Caloy are dismantling the billboard, and after witnessing a vegetable truck fall from the Skyway, carry a spirited, emotional debate on whether to go down and help rescue the hapless victims. The people below likewise have seen the accident, but their reaction is pure slapstick in the face of tragedy. Caloy, meanwhile decides to defy the older Emong and goes down to rescue the victims, but help inevitably arrives, although a little too late. It turns out that Caloy, having come from the province where he had witnessed his dad's fatal accident in a steel factory, is the only innocent soul. When he's urged to join in the fray of looting the vegetable truck, he nearly succumbs to the temptation, but still manages to restrain himself and maintain his dignity. The comedy is both a pastoral hymn and an urban critique.

Sir Anril Tiatco's troika of ten-minute one-act plays—"My Pren Gamlin"/"Laruan"/"Rite of Autumn"—presents vignettes of manhood across Philippine history. The first is set in Balangiga, Samar during the American invasion: a nine-year-old local kid befriends a homesick American soldier much to the consternation of the kid's older brother. The American invader, therefore, is seen through the innocent eyes of a boy who welcomes him, and the suspicious eyes of an adult Filipino who's obviously not going to lay out the red carpet for him, especially since the puny "arnis" (bamboo martial art) of the Filipinos is powerless when pitted against the rifle of the American. The weapons motif is carried over to "Laruan" in which kid-scavengers recover a loaded gun and play with it, resulting in tragedy. Considering that the motifs of maleness, innocence, and lethal power (the heavy firearms) have been carried over from the first to the second play, it is quite galling that the last play is a rather vacuous dialogue between "Bhe 1" and "Bhe 2", persons in their thirties (hardly an innocent age) who are obviously living in together, and whose relationship has hit a rut: one wants to get married, the other does not. It is not obvious from the

dialogue, conducted mostly in English or English-laden Filipino, what the genders of the speakers are. And, after directions in Filipino in the first two tableaux, the final directions in the third play lapse into English in order to reveal the twist: both are males: "Bhe 1 walks away leaving *his* cup behind. .. *He* (Bhe 2) … takes Bhe 1's cup and starts drinking it." Compared to the socio-historical and socio-economic critiques germane to the first two plays, the last play seems to be lacking in any relevant concern, which may be the point of the playwright. Its setting—"Europa Bench, Fountain, Park Square"—could be here or elsewhere, and it really does not matter: they reveal how socio-geographic locations have been banalized by colonization and colonial mentality. Moreover the title and the opening discussion on the weather—"E ang lamig na kaya—mid-autumn na, di ba?"— is revelatory of the psychological, moral, and spiritual displacement of contemporary Filipinos forever acclimatized to western lifestyle fads and fashions, such as "gender issues," but whose preoccupations are alien to the needs and concerns of the country at this stage of its social and economic development. Against the rites of passage that the kids in the first two plays are made to undergo by history and poverty, the last play portrays a homosexual relationship on the decline amid the "Rite of Autumn."

The only screenplay in this anthology is "Sekyu" by Brylle Tabora. Meant for a feature-length film, "Sekyu" is set in the 1990s and tells the story of a very young family man who's finishing a vocational course while earning a living as a security guard of a condominium whose residents are a cross-section of urban-depths characters. One of this is the kept mistress of a local politician who's aiming for higher office. They become friends after sharing a common passion for "komiks;" he aspires to put up a car-mechanic shop when he finishes school, but she's wizened enough to realize that the world of magic and melodrama pales in comparison to the real world: "Hindi komiks ang mundo" ("The world is not a graphic novel"). She later meets a brutal fate and he's shocked and mortified. Although he does not exactly live up to the fantastic heroism of his favorite *komiks* characters, he refuses to compromise his ideals and give up his human dignity. A compelling character study that would certainly suit the naturalist bent of much of "Indie" cinema, "Sekyu" won second prize in the screenplay category of the 2015 Don Carlo Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature.

Nicolas B. Pichay's "Mysteryland" is the only musical drama in the anthology. A witty satire on the theme-park entertainment of Hollywood

movies and Broadway-West End musical productions, it tells the story of three aspiring performers who audition for various parts in "Mysteryland," which, based on its excerpts during the audition, appears to symbolize the Orientalism fundamental to much of the global Anglo-American musical theater (*Miss Saigon*, *Flower Drum Song*) and Disney film musicals (*Aladdin*, *Mulan*, *Pocahontas*). Given the chance to join the musical, they find out they can hardly fit into the larger-than-life costumes and console themselves by wearing the uniforms of servants, the mean professions, and migrant labor. Realizing they have been fitted by global capitalist entertainment into the predetermined parts of performing-arts servitude, they defiantly stage their own production, "Unggoyland" (Monkeyland). Pichay's work is a merry-go-round of a musical with a very mordant message.

The biggest coup in this collection is the inclusion of Bernardo Bernardo's Tagalog translation of American playwright Lonnie Carter's stage adaptation of Carlos Bulosan's celebrated short story, "The Romance of Magno Rubio." Originally staged by the off-Broadway Ma-Yi Theater Company in New York City in 2002, the play went on to win in the following year eight Obie Awards from the *Village Voice*, and has been staged in various productions in the United States, Europe, and of course, the Philippines. Bernardo had worked in several of those productions in the US, as actor, director, and in this case, translator. Part of the Asian-American canon, Bulosan's famous story is about a pitiful Filipino illiterate laborer in 1930s North America who falls in love with a blonde in Arkansas who's out to bilk him of everything he's worth. In 2011, Bernardo directed twin Los Angeles productions of Carter's original verse dramatic adaptation in English and its Tagalog version written by Bernardo himself. The *LA Weekly* said the tale of Magno Rubio and the migrant worker's plight in both versions "is told with captivating honesty, as scenes seamlessly glide from one to the next courtesy of … Bernardo's impeccable timing."

This is the first time Bernardo's Tagalog version is published in either of the two continents, and it bridges not only the Babel-like disparateness and polarization of having two languages and sensibilities: Bulosan was an Ilocano who was a migrant in the US who wrote in English about the American dream/nightmare; Carter is a North American who wrote his adaptation in English verse; and Bernardo, a modern Filipino adept in American English, who wrote his Tagalog version of Carter's adaptation in English, conscious of postcolonial quandaries and the rift between gen-

erations of Filipinos who either embrace the American colonial legacy or reject it altogether.

Bernardo straddles the divide between modern and contemporary stage: in the 1960s and 1970s he worked with modern theater giants such as Lamberto Avellana and Daisy Hontiveros, Onofre Pagsanjan and Zenaida Amador; in the United States in the new century, he worked in contemporary productions, notably "Magno Rubio;" coming back to the Philippines in the second decade of the new century, he took on cutting-edge roles in classical theater such as *Haring Lear* and experimental plays such as those in the Virgin Labfest. He likewise embodies the multidisciplinary manifestation of the performing arts in the Philippines: he's a gifted thespian in stage, cinema, and television, winning the *Gawad Urian* for Best Actor in 1980 for Ishmael Bernal's masterpiece *City After Dark*, and a decade later, making his mark in the popular consciousness with his hilarious role as the office "taray" gay endlessly picking and hyperventilating on Dolphy's bungling but honest janitor in the weekly TV sitcom, *Home Along Da Riles*. But not too many people know him as a first-rate writer (he took up Journalism in UST and was editor-in-chief of the *UST Varsitarian*), equally proficient in English and Tagalog. All of his multifaceted talent and experience in the performing arts and the media world come into full play in his Tagalog version of "Magno Rubio." Although he wrote it in the United States, the fact that he's publishing it for the first time in this UST anthology should be nothing less than a homecoming.

In the context of *Tomás*, an academic literary journal connected with the University of Santo Tomas, an institution founded by Spanish Dominicans in the 17th century that has lasted across historical transitions, including the North American hegemony in the 20th century and the early decades of the new millennium, the publication of the Tagalog version of a verse drama in English, adapted by a US playwright from a short story in English about the early Filipino migrant workers' experience in prewar US, which had been written by an Ilocano migrant worker himself in the US, "Magno Rubio" the dramatic text is nothing short of seminal, historical, problematical, and all of these at once. Bernardo's translation should make this dramatic anthology celebrating the fifth anniversary of the restoration of the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies significant and memorable, indeed.