

# The Filipino Theatre

By Daisy Hontiveros-Avellana



## ACT I: Pre-1941

**T**HERE WAS NO Filipino theater. There were moro-moro plays, and there were the *zarzuelas*. There were some plays written both in Tagalog and in Spanish, and a few in English. A limited num-

ber of foolhardy young souls like Wilfrido Ma. Guerrero, Severino Montano, Francisco Rodrigo, A. E. Litiaco, Hilarion Vibal presented before the public the plays they had written. Artistic successes? Oh yes! Financial? What does the word mean?

The dramatic clubs of those days were also divided into two groups: the Spanish-speaking groups like the *Circulo Escenico*, *Talia*, *Arte y Caridad*; and the younger, English-speaking groups: the *Community Players*, the *Cosmopolitan Dramatic Guild*, the *Players' Guild*, and the *Barangay Theatre Guild*.

All these local dramatic organizations experienced the same difficulties. Most of the people taking part in the plays were working people, or students, who spare only their evenings for rehearsals. Someone in the cast got sick—the others would have to carry on in his absence. The players rehearsed far into the night. And the realization that they would have to be up early the following morning for their various duties did not make tempers any too sweet. Someone came late—all the others had to wait, whether they liked it or not, for him to show up. It did not have any good effect on the nerves to have to act on stage with an invisible companion.

Then, of course, there was the question of scenery, costumes, and lighting effects. How to get the best possible of these three utterly necessary items at the very lowest prices—that was the problem which made amateur producers' hair turn gray. It was useless to expect to gain anything financial-

ly from these amateur productions—after one had paid for expenses, which also included rental for the theater (a major expense)—there just wasn't anything left even for a cast party.

These amateur dramatic organizations staged plays for the sheer joy of acting, and not for purposes of making money. It was ridiculous therefore, to expect them to lavish money on expensive scenery, costumes, and lighting effects—especially when there was no money to be lavished.

#### *ACT II: 1942-1945.*

**T**O ALL APPEARANCES, this period was the beginning of our Golden Age in the theater. The local stage never had it so good. We had scenic designers, musical directors, playwrights, publicity men, and actors. Tagalog was accepted, willingly or not, as the language for all these presentations, except for some that were presented in English.

The form of entertainment for young and old was the stage show, which started as a mixture of drama in all its level and plain vaudeville. A little later, an enterprising company (*The Philippine Artists's League*) took a step farther by divorcing the actual play from the musical numbers, and thus getting two separate good shows

instead of one trite hodge-podge. The other companies promptly followed suit, and Manila audiences were then treated to plays that were coherent and understandable.

Since these presentations were staged in moviehouses, the problem of acoustics came up. So did microphones. To use or not to use? "Off with them!" shouted the purists. They did not stop to consider that doing so would have meant resorting to pantomime — in a theater as huge as the Avenue, say, where the stage had not been designed for dramatic presentations, no voice, no matter how clear and resonant, could have been heard beyond the first few rows without the aid of the lowly mike.



"Hide the microphone!" shouted the fence-sitters. In a flower pot maybe, or under a chain? Then watch the attention of the audience wander from the play to an intriguing game: *where* is the microphone?

The microphones stayed. Charges of "Illegitimate!" rent the air. "You are *not* the theater!" was the accusation hurled to the stage show. But that unfeeling creature went merrily on its way. "After all," as one amused producer of one such stage show said, "No amount of seals, whether by Good Housekeeping, the Bureau of Health, or Armour's Ham, can establish the legitimacy of a dramatic company."

Close on the flourishing reign of the stage shows came several

plays in English, and they too met signal success. The rosters of actors who so wholeheartedly gave of their abundant talents to both Tagalog and English plays was a brilliant and distinguished one.

To these actors and to many more, we owe not only several hours of pleasant entertainment, but also the much-needed relaxation and release from the cares and anxieties of the day. This, after all, is the final destiny of the theater. The invisible yet solid bond between the actors on stage and the people who watch them; the sympathy, understanding, and responsive reactions between these two groups; the communion between life as reproduced behind the footlights and the lives of those in the orchestra seats, in the balcony, and in the loge. Upon that magnificent power of the stage to compress in two hours a whole lifetime, or a snatch of a lifetime, lies its vindication. For the theater, after all, is not on the stage behind the footlights — it is there among the seats.

### ACT III: Post- 1945.

SO MACARTHUR returned, along with several hundred thousand men whom a grateful Philippines eventually learned to call by their first names — names which all stood for one word: *friend*. The traditional

Filipino hospitality once again came to the fore. What little there was in the way of food was shared with the "Americano." But the average Joe didn't care much for exotic dishes that didn't agree with him. Joe wanted a different dish: entertainment. And that meant, for nine Joes out of ten, a leg show. And songs. Stateside. Sung badly or sung well, but still, American songs. And so the musical show came into its own. Old joke books were dug up; costumes mostly on the tawdry side, were hurriedly made from whatever material was available; furniture was borrowed from trusting neighbors; a few dances rehearsed in haphazard manner; leading movie-personalities signed up for the starring roles; and the curtains creakily opened on what would probably go down in theater history as the blackest period of the local stage.

Manila was beginning to look like a huge army encampment. Khaki was everywhere. But working on the premise that the civilians must still be around, somewhere, and that maybe they wanted entertainment, too, some of the local directors decided to present plays in Tagalog once again. The "lolas" in the audience sighed with contentment. This was their theater.

The happy state of affairs did not last long. First-run mo-

vies, exciting in their newness, hit Manila and took the city by storm. People flocked to them in droves. The owners of the smaller theaters looked on, alarmed. Why shouldn't some of that good money come their way, too? The plays in Tagalog were given a most unceremonious kick right where it hurt most — the box-office. "There'll be some changes made," sang the owners of the small theaters, and that was the funeral march for the Tagalog plays.

But the memory lingers on. History does repeat itself, and once more the school and colleges, as well as the local amateur theatrical groups, have taken up the gauntlet. The Dramatic Philippines (organized during the war years) and the Barangay Theatre Guild (organized early in 1939) are still

in there pitching. New groups have come in, too. These others are also dreaming of the day when the Filipino national theater will come into its own, finally. There's Severino Montano's Arena Theater, Jean Edades' Philippine Theater, the Civic Theater, Incorporated. And there are our esteemed colleagues in both the American and the Spanish communities: the American *Manila Theatre Guild* and the *Spanish Circulo Escenico*.

Right now the question of what language to use for the national theater is not important: English, Spanish, Tagalog, Visayan, Ilocano, every little bit helps. Every little production put on by amateur groups and by the school organizations is just one more little step forward.

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### **Doctor, Doctor**

*I was in the hospital, due to be operated upon at 8 a.m. But the attendant did not arrive to take me to the operating room until 9:45. As he transferred me from my bed to the cart, I remarked, "They must be awfully busy in the operating room this morning. You're one hour and 45 minutes late."*

*One of his aides clapped his hand to his head and exclaimed, "Oh, man, it's been murder up there this morning!"*

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