

Producing A Play

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The production of a play involves the contributive cooperation of several creative minds, working, it is assumed, towards one ideal: the creation on the stage of a presentation, in whatever form the creators should prefer, its artistic integrity and sincerity of purpose being the only requirements; a presentation intended for an audience, viewed, applauded or damned, as the case may be, but *viewed* by an audience that shall have paid adequately for the right to so applaud or damn.

A play that is written but not produced is so much ink on book paper. A play must be brought to life, it must be spoken and acted out. As an aria must be sung, a dance performed, so a play must be seen and heard. This can only be done with an audience. And here we come to the burden of the plaint.

In the Philippines we put on plays. But the ratio of our theatre-goers to the total so-

called educated, cultured population is embarrassing, indeed.

In theatre-conscious centers of the world, the box-office determines whether a play is to stay on the boards for several years or the financier should buy himself a rope and a ladder.

In the Philippines, reputedly one of the most advanced and progressive of Far Eastern nations, a play that manages on honest, no-arms-twisted, no-passes-foisted, and non-subsidized run of three to four evenings is considered a success.

Why, then, do we produce plays, and for whom do we do it?

Plays are presented in schools as part of the students' education and training; then usually, as graduates, they form themselves into dramatic guilds and venture forth with epic hopes of permanently establishing the long-sought-after Filipino na-

tional theatre. Tiring of this particular aggrupation, they form further splinter organizations, and from these seceding sections more little workshops and little drama societies emerge, to pop out in all their glory after two months of rehearsals into one play, three performances and a general walk-out to form still another group. This over-recurring pattern of events can continue and has continued for a long, long time, but we are still without a national theatre, without a single professional company, without even a two-by-four building which we could say has been formally erected as a theatre, built at least with an intelligent understanding of the minor theatre requirements such as acoustics, dressing-room partitioning, lights, pit and well, set storage and so on.

We have had to put on plays in debating rooms, chapels, churches, gymnasiums, radio broadcasting rooms, commencement halls, movie houses and even cockpits.

Philippine theatre stints have utilized traditional, conventional scenery, or no scenery at all, arena or in the round, proscenium and front-of-curtain.

We have perpetrated miracles and fiascos with one-act

plays, three-act plays, foreign and local; we have done readings, in costume and without, with lecterns and without; tragedies and farces, in English and Tagalog; we have done originals and translations, from Spanish, French, Roumanian, Mexican. We have tried everything from Shakespeare to Peralta. But still no Filipino national theatre. Risking the danger of being accused of over-simplifying the situation, I would like to state simply: the reason we do not have a national theatre is, *we do not have an audience.*

And the reason we do not have an audience is not that we do not have directors, playwrights, actors, a theatre, good, bad or indifferent in each case, not simply that the cultural level of the person who has one peso twenty to spend prefers Bentot to Fidel Sicam as an actor, the story of *Mahiwagang Mangkukulam* to Forsaken House. Or would you like to imagine how many SRO nights Bradford Dillman will rake in against Neil Sedaka on Broadway? Then change the locale to the Araneta Coliseum. A safe bet should be, Sedaka stays a month and Dillman goes home after two days. With one peso twenty, one can witness a chariot race. With eighty cen-

tavos one can sit through three screenings of Susana del Val weeping out her pancreas. So why watch Nick Agudo behind a beard talking to a dagger?

A person is asked to buy a ticket to a play and he will have any number of reactions: who's in it, what is it all about, for what is it, why for three days only, is there *bakbakan* or not, and why is it in English, the hall is not air-conditioned, that place! I'll get bitten by *surot*, what, no bathing suits, no dancing legs, no one will sing a la Elvis — what will they do, just talk and talk? Oh, it's in Tagalog. That's different, I definitely cannot go. I'm Visayan. Besides the only "arena" I know goes into *pan de sal*. And as for the reading — I took it up in the third grade.

The situation is not hopeless, of course. But we will need time. Time, as they say, is of the essence.

Time to develop an audience to such an extent that it will freely attend the theatre, not because they have relatives in the cast, or because they want to criticize the male lead, but because they sincerely want to see a good play, presented well, by a competent, if not always brilliant, cast, in a reasonably acceptable stage

house, with the same willingness and spirit as they would buy an NCAA ticket, a Clover Theatre ticket, watch a TV show or attend a movie.

Actually the national theatre has a larger family than we imagine. Besides plays, we must not forget that theatre includes: ballet performances, concerts, recitals, operas, musical comedies, zarzuelas. How many nights — of relatively full houses — can the ballet groups command? How many people can we guarantee will attend a serious concert by local musicians? people for four nights (including the gala performance) when the audience is mostly composed of exhibitionistic grand dames and society debutantes whose only use for the program is to fan themselves with? Now if a concert or a ballet performance can stand for only three to four nights with an audience, does it mean our musicians and ballet performers are inferior artists?

Now for the opera. The opera has songs even. How many nights? Four? five, including the tickets that were distributed free so that there would be some human beings to sing to? We have had our Jovita Fuenteses, and now our Fides Cuyugan-Asencios. How many nights on the

other hand, might have been possible for a Joni James?

Let's push our probing farther. In the search for theatre audiences let us also inquire how many people go out to look over paintings and attend one-man exhibits, sculpture exhibits. On the other hand, do you want statistics on how many people have gone to the Manila Zoo?

I should like to join cause with the poor, benighted individuals who have embraced the theatre for the sheer love of it, the hopeful groups who, with their continuous knocking at the door of people's consciousness for support of the theatre, are thereby creating the ambient, clearing the ground, exerting effort and perspiration, spending hard-earned money, at times away from school or office, in the clear wish that some day the apathy will be gone, the barrier shall have been broken, because, finally, the taste for the theatre has been developed.

So I say to Dr. Montano, keep on with the Arena Theatre, do it in English in Manila, translate your play into Ilocano and Hiligaynon, change it over to Ibanag and bring it to the rurals areas and there, show them what a play is and how completely it can be enjoyed. I take cause with you

because you are helping create an audience.

I would say to Jean Edades, carry on with discovering young people who like to stand on the stage and take roles. Make them speak in English well, let them have their training, and be rewarded with the thought that with every person who sees them, applauds them, is an actual addition to that audience that we devoutly wish for.

To Pimentel — sure, the Passion Play during Lent; you've helped swell that audience.

And now television. Perhaps, through television to the theatre. The IL-FGU group, the FEU Dramatic Guild, the Ateneo Players Guild, the drama groups of all schools — all these are helping to build that audience, the audience we need, which must support the national theater, that will pay its way in, so directors can be paid, so actors can be paid, so playwrights can write, not because they have to for a thesis, but because they are good playwrights, know their art, and therefore can collect respectably for their work. Only then, when people in sufficient number can support the theatre, may we lay down the yardstick of professionalism against their output. To date,

all societies are amateur groups. I will defend to the last my contention that many of these drama groups are amateur only in the finest sense of the word.

I believe we should keep on putting on plays, developing talent of all forms; in the writing, in the acting, in the producing ends. People who will develop the taste for the theatre must be constantly exposed to it, in its various forms with dramatic literature of the past and present, the classics and the moderns, in prose and poetry, so that out of the knowledge and actual contact with all these, there will be a distillation of our own culture, a flowering of our own dramatic theatre art.

Let not Nick Joaquin stop with *Portrait*. Or Guerrero with his several books. The search for the Filipino theatre form in writing has yet to be consummated. Joaquin has borrowed from the Spanish spirit and written in English. Guerrero has used the truth of the candid camera for his creations, dabbling in dark, dark tragedy and caricature in farces. And now Antonio O. Bayot, who seems best to have captured the Filipino manner of thought, who has best infused his characters with recognizably Filipino behavior.

He, it seems, has not borrowed from the moderns and the avant gardes on Broadway. He has preferred to write as a Filipino about the Filipinos. Probably, he is, at present, closest to what might eventually be the acceptable form of playwriting for our national theatre.

Of course a way must be made for the experimenting Peraltas, Morenos and Lapeñas, and Prolific Florentinos. There must be more. They must come forward, and in their search for their style, they shall be helping the greater cause: the search for an audience.

We must encourage our playwrights by giving life to their creations, from the printed word to the warmth of the stage. The actors should, under able and consistent tutorship by directors, refine their art, imbibing what method, approach or interpretation is the distinguishing style of their particular group, and passing this on to others on a truly apprenticeship basis; encourage technicians who must contribute their own artistry in the execution of creative settings, the handling of lights, the music; we must encourage the members of the sales staff to effect measures to make the box-office effective and live-

ly; we should continue to present school plays; more and more groups should be formed so that in the variety of methods and madneses, a truly Filipino theatre will emerge.

The Filipino national theatre is not just a building. It is not just a Tagalog play. It is not just a set of playwrights necessarily writing about the nipa hut and slums of Tondo, English plays, Tagalog plays — there should be no discus-

sion here. We should have them all, to develop that awareness in the average individual.

Theater-aware individuals will constitute the theatre audience. And that audience, by the power of the box-office, will determine the course and nature of the Filipino theatre.

That audience, that *paying* audience, will demand professionalism. It is my belief that the amateurs will not be found wanting.

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DEDICATION

The visitor to the poet's wife expressed her surprise that the man of genius had failed to dedicate any one of his volumes to the said wife. Whereupon, said wife became flustered, and declared tartly:

"I never thought of that. As soon as you are gone, I'll look through all his books, and if that's so, I never will forgive him!"

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DEFINITION

The schoolboy, after profound thought, wrote this definition of the word "spine," at his teacher's request.

"A spine is a long, limber bone. You head sets on one end and you set on the other."