

The Performing Arts

By Ricardo Cassell

IT IS MY BELIEF that one, if not the one, great factor that has held back advance in all aspects of artistic endeavour, particularly in the performing arts, is the many factions into which the Philippines is divided. In art we are bound to find those who follow, appreciate and even idealize one particular artist, group or movement in a particular field. This is a sad commentary on the intelligence of such biased factions, but this condition is most prevalent here.

It is only right and natural that those who appreciate art in any form will have definite preferences and dislikes. But when preferences reach the point of prejudice, and judgment and ap-

preciation are blinded by bias, then it becomes a most unhealthy condition for growth in any field. It has been responsible to a great degree for the present state of artistic endeavor. It is true that art and culture want and seek the approval of society and the general public, but too often cultural functions are reduced to social functions. Is an artist to be judged only by his artistic worth or by his social background? Should an artist be solely interested in activities in his own field or support ventures in other fields and give recognition to the works and achievements of others? Is he to expect recognition of his own worth if he is not equally willing to recognize that worth

in others? Is he to be afraid to give acknowledgment of the value of others for fear it might weaken his own little faction? Any field of art is competitive. We all recognize this, but in competition there is still room for cooperation and recognition. Let me be the first to admit that even within my own group or following, judgment is sometimes shaped by prejudice. Being an artist I revolt at criticism and am overjoyed with praise. Quite natural! Praise makes the effort worthwhile, while criticism makes me strive to produce something beyond such criticism. But in my heart, I know there is nothing in art that can reach such a standard as to be above criticism, for nothing in art can be perfect or please all.

There has been sporadic talk and lukewarm interest shown in the construction of a National Theatre. I am afraid that the construction of a National Theatre would be a case of putting the cart before the horse. If the primary purpose of this theatre is for the use of visiting artists from abroad or for the few groups that have the drawing power to fill such a theatre, then is it a worthwhile undertaking? How many of the small dramatic groups who find even the F.E.U. Auditorium too large to fill with an audience, could afford to use a large theatre?

Could this theatre be of advantage to them? How many operas, vocalists, pianists, ballet groups, orchestras, etc., would find such a great value in this theatre? Truly, we need a better equipped theatre with a larger stage, but are we ready for it? Aren't there other things that art and artists need far more? How many of the problems confronting cultural advance would be solved by such a theatre?

THIS THEATRE would need a director or a governing board. In view of the many factions prevalent here, what person or persons would direct the policies of this theatre without prejudice? Such a theatre will cost money to maintain and operate. Would the rental for performances in this theatre be beyond the reach of some groups? Would it not be better for the development of local artists to perform more often to smaller audiences than to a larger audience?

I think we need a National Theatre, but not built of concrete and steel, but of artists and audience. When we have such an audience that our theatres are too small to accommodate them, then it is time to build a larger and better theatre. Let's build that National Theatre with our artists first. To do this, we need cooperation among artists and the break-

down of factionalism. How this is to come about is a problem which I don't pretend to solve, but it must be solved before we can see the improvement in cultural activities here that we all want.

We have in the Philippines no theatre group that has reached general acclaim and is as active on the local scene as the "Manila Theatre Guild." I should not include musicians and the various orchestras who, although performing regularly or quite, enjoy comparatively few concert performances. This Theatre Guild has been able to present plays twelve months out of the year that run as long as one week each to adequate or full houses. Their performing artists are drawn primarily from a minority group. Their audience is composed generally of a minority group. Some of the plays presented are excellent. Then why is it that with all the Philippines to draw from for both artists and audience, there is no national group that is as successful and active on the local scene?

Far too often, we, the local artists, look for outside help and are too preoccupied with our private likes and dislikes. If the interest of the group infringes on our own plans, we too often fail to realize that we will profit as artists in direct ratio to the profit or progress of art, parti-

cularly in our own field.

Let me take the example of a ballet dancer. There is little or no field for those who want to make dancing, not teaching, a career. A future for ballet can only be created by raising the standard of the art here, developing a larger audience and in general improving the lot of all dancers. The future of the individual does not so much depend on personal acclaim and even ability, as it does on the recognition and high standard attained by ballet as an art here. There will be no future here for a dancer unless the future for ballet is secured. The same is true of drama and other theatrical arts. When the local audience demands more and better stage plays and we are able to provide them, then we have a future for a actor. I we present not one good dancer, but a number of good dancers in entertaining performances that will make the audience come back for more, then the individual dancers have a future. But if the individual dancer is afraid of competition and will put his or her interests above and opposed to the best interests of the group, that future will be long delayed.

The other point I wish to touch upon is the proposed commissioner of arts. The author and those who support the idea that there should be within the

Philippine government a body to extend aid to and perhaps have some regulatory power over artistic endeavours are making a grave mistake. The same problems of factionalism will enter into such a department. Who is to say what is true or good art and what is not? Such a commission would have certain responsibilities and with those responsibilities there must be authority. Who is qualified to hold such authority, and what is that authority to consist of? The commission was proposed to promote art and the interest of the artists, I gather. I think such a commission would be decidedly opposed to

the interests of art and artists. Would you want me or one of my followers to judge the work of another teacher or choreographer? If this commission were to offer aid to a competitor, would I not cry out "favoritism"?

The future of the arts and artists lies not in outside help so much as in cooperation and team-work. We can use help, but we can do much by admitting that other artists have something to offer. What is good for art is good for the artists, but it is not necessarily true that what is good for the artists is good for the art.

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A minister, trying to impress his young daughter with the necessity of silence while he was writing his Sunday sermon reminded her, "You know it's the good Lord who really tells me what to say."

"If that's true," demanded the daughter, "why do you scratch so much of it out?"

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