

PERFORMING HUMAN RIGHTS: *PISTA RIZALINA*'S INTERROGATIONS OF MARTIAL LAW, EXTRA-JUDICIAL KILLINGS AND HISTORICAL REVISIONISM AT THE CULTURAL CENTER OF THE PHILIPPINES

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Abstract

The essay inquires a general question: what is the relationship of theater and human rights? A preliminary reflection is provided using the different activities staged at the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) on the occasion of *Pista Rizalina* (Fiesta Rizalina) in September 2017. The festival was named after Rizalina Ilagan, a student activist-artist abducted by the military during the Martial Law era under President Ferdinand E. Marcos. To date, Ilagan's body has not been found. The festival is a commemoration of the victims of human rights violations encountered by thousands of Filipinos since the Martial Law era of Marcos. In the end, it is argued that performing human rights at the CCP is a tool to transmit traumatic experiences for the understanding of those who did not suffer violence, oppression and tyranny (i.e. today's younger generation). The relationship of theatre and human rights is asserted to be a rehearsal for a community where the *other* is encountered with care and responsibility.

Keywords: theatre and human rights, protest theatre, Philippine society and culture, Ferdinand Marcos, Rodrigo Duterte, theatre and activism

Introduction

On 21 September 1972, then President Ferdinand E. Marcos declared Martial Law via Presidential Proclamation Number 1081. According to the Digital Museum of Martial Law in the Philippines (2017), the declaration was

supposed to suppress the rise of communism in the Philippines. However, an estimate of 70,000 individuals were imprisoned, 34,000 were tortured and 3,240 were killed since its declaration. Marcos suspended the writ of *habeas corpus*. Historian Filemon Rodriguez (1985) explains this paved for many human rights violations.

The dissidents continued to encounter human rights abuses albeit Martial Law was lifted on 17 January 1981. The Filipino people finally stood against the dictatorship of Marcos via a peaceful revolution dubbed as People Power and paved the way for the overthrowing of Marcos on 25 February 1986. Corazon Aquino, wife of the opposition leader Benigno Aquino Jr., who was assassinated in 1983, succeeded Marcos as President. To date, the Philippine nation remembers the revolution as the restoration of democracy in the country.

On 9 May 2016, the majority of the Filipino people elected then Davao City Mayor Rodrigo Roa Duterte as the 16th president of the country. His administration as mayor is infamous for the transformation of Davao City from a lawless city into a city of order and Mindanao's prime city (Ronquillo, 2016). Nonetheless, his methods for achieving this in Davao are known publicly as shoot and kill strategy and based on punitive policies. During his campaign, Duterte was even proudly attesting that he would transform the archipelago into a Davao City committing to a nationwide "war-on-drugs".

Since Duterte's win, the dictator Marcos was buried at the *Libingan ng mga Bayani* (National Heroes Cemetery). An estimate 13,000 individuals were killed by the police, military and even ordinary people (popularly labeled as riders-in-tandem). As of writing this essay, the latest casualties are three teenagers: a grade 11 student, a sophomore from the University of the Philippines Diliman and a 15-year old boy.

The House of Congress passed a resolution giving the Commission on Human Rights an annual budget of Php 1,000.00 (around 200 USD) because many congressmen and women (mostly allies of the president) are convinced that the Commission is not supportive of the Duterte's programs. These members of the Congress even cite the Commission as siding with the enemies of the state (*i.e.* criminals) (Cayabyab, 2017).

In addition, schools of indigenous communities in South Philippines were shut down due to paranoia that these schools are cradles of insurgents, communists and terrorists.

Finally, the Martial Law was imposed to the entire island of Mindanao after the Maute Group, a terrorist group affiliated with the Islamic State or ISIS, sieged Marawi City.

On a general note, something is happening in the socio-political sphere of the Philippines. There seems to be an implicit revision of history: the administration wants the Filipinos to move on by simply forgiving and forgetting the horrors of the Martial Law. Surprisingly, textbooks in high schools and some private universities are not even discussing the Martial Law as turmoil in the development of Philippine modernity.

There also seems to be a reverberation of the Marcos era in today's time: many Filipinos are now lamenting the death of individuals through the apparent extra-judicial killings (EJKs). Yet, many are still clamouring that all these are necessary to truly experience change.

These motivated many social scientists, academics and artists to evaluate the nation's current conditions by addressing the most urgent concerns and most pressing issues, especially those related to human rights. Sociologist Nicole Curato (2017) urged the public to talk about Duterte and reflect on his sudden rise despite past traumatic experiences of the country.

Most recently, the CCP through its Vice President Chris Millado and playwright-director from the Ateneo de Manila University Guelan Luarca staged *Pista Rizalina*, a festival named after Rizalina Ilagan, a student-activist abducted by the military. To date, her body has not been found. While the festival is dubbed as a festival of arts and ideas, a month-long festival of theatre, films and lectures with the Philippine Bill of Rights as centerpiece, it generally commemorated victims of human rights violations encountered by thousands of Filipinos since the Martial Law.

This essay documents the different activities staged at the CCP on the occasion of *Pista Rizalina*. It attempts to provide a preliminary reflection on a general question: what is the relationship of human rights and theatre, particularly in the context of the Philippines? While the essay describes the details of the creative works included in the festival, it argues that performing human rights at the CCP is a useful tool to transmit traumatic experiences for the understanding of those who did not suffer violence, oppression and tyranny especially today's younger generation. In the end, we assert that the relationship of theatre and human rights may be understood as a rehearsal for a community where the *other* is encountered with care and responsibility.

Theatre and Human Rights in the Philippines since the 1900's

On 10 December 1948, the United Nations drafted a “common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society” (United Nations, 2015), otherwise known as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Composed of 30 articles affirming the rights of every human being regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, or any other statuses, the declaration was constituted after World War II due to the dismissal and shelving of the human dignity caused by the war.

Even if the declaration was only formalized in 1948, many Filipino theatre artists were already performing stage productions that criticized the people and institutions that denied freedom, justice and peace among the Filipino people as early as the 1900's. Artists-turned-revolutionaries such as Aurelio Tolentino, Juan Abad and Juan Matapang Cruz “turned their stage to a seditious purpose, though the authorities [had] not seen fit to censor it, except for the more daring of the dramas intended to stir up the native spirit” reported by the Sydney-based newspaper *The Theatre* (cited in Gilbert & Tompkins [1996, p. 1]). Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio (1972) explains Tolentino's, Abad's and Cruz's works outlined the human rights violations experienced by the Filipino people during colonization in the performances of their *sarsuwelas* (local musical drama) and *drama simbolico* (seditious plays).

These plays were symbolical in a sense that the artists “having tasted of the bitter lessons of the past, like the chameleon in a forest inhabited by bigger and more powerful forces, had realized the value and skill of blending colors with the surrounding flora and fauna, of disappearing momentarily, if his survival is to be assured” (Lapeña-Bonifacio, 1972, p. 30). Tiatco and Ramolete note that the chameleon attribution of these plays are found in the staging techniques and forms of technology used during that period: “American viewers would often not recognize something ‘subversive’ was communicated to the members of the audience [...] The use of a sun rising and filling the stage with rosy hues, a statue of the goddess of liberty coming to life and exhorting the people to conquer and die for her, or a huge eagle threatening to eat the people. These stage effects all represented critiques of the colonial situation under the Americans” (Tiatco & Ramolete, 2010, p. 324). In relation, activist and playwright Bonifacio Ilagan (2010) recognizes these revolutionary writers as “theater artists of that bygone era [who] were activists of the first order” (Ilagan, 2010, p. 116) inspiring Philippine activist-artists today to continue fighting for the dignity of every person.

Tolentino, for instance wrote *Bagong Cristo (New Christ)* in 1907. This drama simbolico is an exposition of the plight of the Filipino labourers against greedy capitalists. Inspired by labour leader Dominador Gomez, Tolentino presented for the first time on the Philippine stage the abuses of the *may-puhunan* (capitalists) against the *obrero* (labour workers). *Bagong Cristo* was a milestone in Philippine history as it paved way for labourers to convene and institute unions (Lapeña-Bonifacio, 1972; Tolentino & Zapanta-Manlapaz, 1975).

A century after the writing of *Bagong Cristo*, labour issues are still dominant in Philippine society. Apolonio Bayani Chua (2009) outlines the history and practices of trade union turned cultural organizations in the Greater Manila Area, with special emphasis on the groups *Tanghalang Silangan* and *Teatro Pabrika*. Chua recognizes that the performances of songs, skits, poetry reading and short dance dramas among labour workers during rallies and demonstrations against the oppressive factory owners were inspired by the revolutionary spirit at the turn of the 20th century Philippines. Particularly, these trade organizations exposed the exploitations of factory owners using dramaturgical works of artists-revolutionists such as Francisco Baltazar, Aurelio Tolentino, Andres Bonifacio, Macario Sakay, the theatre organization founded by Tolentino, Bonifacio and Sakay Teatro Porvenir (est. 1887), the labour organization Union Obrera Democratica de Filipinas (1901-1903), to name a few (Chua, 2009).

Nonetheless, the Martial Law Era (1972 – 1981) changed the political performance landscape of the Philippines. Social scientist Hanafi Hussin (2006) explains that the proclamation of Martial Law led to an intense social dissatisfaction all over the archipelago leading to several public demonstrations. Radical organizations popularized slogans such as 'anti-imperialism,' 'anti-feudalism' and 'anti-bureaucratic capitalism' calling for a revolution to the younger generations (Hanafi Hussin 1995, 1996, 2006). The theatre was instrumental in informing everyone about the political situation of the nation because of its improvisational nature (Hanafi Hussin, 2006; Atienza, 2010).

The different cultural organizations such as Kamanyang, Tanghalang Bayan, Kalinangan Anak Pawis and Panday Sining used political theatres to invoke a renewed sense of nationalism based on a call for independence against human rights violations and despotic rule. Like the drama simbolico of the 1900's, the performances were allegorical capturing the present state of the nation as social commentaries against the dictator Marcos. For instance, playwright and Professor Isagani R. Cruz's *Halimaw (The Monster)*, written in

1971) analogizes the dictator to an *aswang*, a monster (Tiatco & Ramolete, 2010, p. 322). Hussin explains that usually these plays against Marcos and Martial Law ended with actors literally calling for a social revolution (Hanafi Hussin, 1995, 1996, 2006).

Visiting the Philippines during the Martial Law era, community theatre scholar Eugene van Erven commented how courageous local artists were defending democracy and fighting against human rights violations despite threats of imprisonment and eventually death (Van Erven, 1992, p. 34). Filipino theatre practitioners back then were “against an intrinsically oppressive and exploitative system” and “proved that theater was an excellent arena to dramatize rebellion” (Ilagan, 2010, p. 116). Consequently, artist-activists like Leo Alto, Merardo Arce, Armando and Romulo Palabay, and Rizalina Ilagan were arrested, imprisoned, tortured, raped, and killed (p. 119). National Artist Bienvenido Lumbera (2010) notes that Philippine theater at that time was also taken out of the stage and into the streets paving way for protest theatre forms in picket-lines, demonstrations and even in makeshift stages in the market places and town plazas.

In relation, professor and theatre practitioner Glecy Atienza (2010) points out that while new works depicting human rights abuses and the tyranny of Marcos were constantly staged from 1972 to 1986, there is another type of protest theatre that became popular: *mga dulang walang pangalan sa lansangan* [untitled theatre pieces in the streets] (p. 128). These are performances staged in public spaces such as the market and even inside the *jeep*, a local public transportation. Atienza reports how two actors inside a crowded public market pretended to be arguing about “*pagtaas ng bilihan*” [high cost of goods] and how one of the two actors would want to boycott the election due to constant cheating of the administration. With the signal of another co-actor among the common people turned spectators, the two would eventually disperse when a member of the MetroCom (a member of the Philippine Constabulary under the Marcos administration) would appear on site (Atienza, 2010, p. 129).

In a personal testimony, playwright Rody Vera (2010) reveals how he came to a realization that theatre might also be a venue for advocacy after having seen a political theatre performance at the University of the Philippines. Under the mentorship of playwright Rene Villanueva, Vera left the University to join fellow cultural workers from the Philippine Educational Theatre Association (PETA) in visiting marginalized communities such as sugar cane workers, factory workers, victims of human rights abuses with one agenda: use theatre as a medium of human rights advocacy. It was this

exposure to communities that paved way for him to make the theatre a living newspaper: informing the audience about the sufferings of the under-represented Filipino people in the fringes. The theatre was and still is an exigency to expose the conditions of Philippine society: "suffering not only from colonial mentality but, from extreme poverty, exploitation by greedy capitalists and feudal landlords, a terribly corrupt justice system, a deceptive and highly commercialized educational system" (Vera, 2010, p. 105).

After Marcos was overthrown in 1986, human rights violations persisted: farmers and factory workers at the Hacienda Luisita (Corazon Aquino's administration, 1986 - 1992); extra-judicial killings in Mindanao (Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's administration, 2001 - 2010); and journalist-killings (Benigno Aquino III's administration, 2010 - 2016). Nonetheless, the ascendancy of Rodrigo Roa Duterte as Philippine President in 2016 has challenged the human rights advocates because on his first few days as President, many Filipinos have been lamenting the death of individuals through the apparent extra-judicial killings (EJKs) caused by the "war-on-drugs." The irony: many are still clamoring that all these are necessary to truly experience change.

President Duterte allowed the burial of the dictator at the National Heroes Cemetery. The national government wants the Filipino people to move on by forgetting the horrors of Martial Law. The reason for this: *to forget* towards national healing. But then, the ghosts of the Martial Law continued to haunt the nation because thousands of suspected individuals, mostly poor Filipinos, are murdered due to the nationwide war-on-drugs. These motivated many artists to once again use theatre as an alternative medium of presenting social problems to the public. A non-government organization called Ladies Who Launch organized a theatre festival called *Never Again: Voices of Martial Law* at the Bantayog ng mga Bayani Auditorium (Heroes Monument Auditorium) in October 2016. The festival provided a warning on historical revisionisms particularly on forgetting the human rights abuses and other abuses by the Marcos regime. The biggest and most comprehensive festival so far is the staging of *Pista Rizalina* at the Cultural Center of the Philippines. This month-long festival juxtaposed three eras: the 1896 revolution, Marcos regime and the current administration.

The Festival at the Cultural Center of the Philippines

According to CCP President Arsenio J. Lizaso and CCP Vice President cum Artistic Director Chris Millado, *Pista Rizalina* "engages various art forms to start conversations on topics that are relevant to the times. The festival brings

together artists and thought leaders to stimulate public discourses in the most creative and engaging way” (Cultural Center of the Philippines [CCP], 2017). In an article by Totel V. De Jesus (2017), CCP Vice President Chris Millado notes the festival was conceived when President Duterte, through the Supreme Court of the Philippines allowed the burial of Ferdinand Marcos at the *Libingan ng mga Bayani*. For Millado, it seems that the entire nation is experiencing a historical amnesia. According to De Jesus, Millado who witnessed the dark days of the Marcos dictatorship feels that “it is particularly imperative that millennials and the young generation do not fall victim to historical revisionism” (De Jesus, 2017).

The festival was named after Rizalina Ilagan, a student-leader and activist from UP Los Baños who was arrested by the military in July 1977. Ilagan and 9 other students were the first of the many Filipinos who disappeared – abducted by the military and are believed to have suffered tortures between 1977 and 1981. To this day, these *desaparecidos* (the disappeared) have not been found.

Staged from 8 to 28 September 2017, the festival “aims to call attention to the universal, collective trauma brought about by arbitrary arrest, disappearance and the negation of rights. Pista Rizalina aims to bring together artists and thought leaders in conversation with the public to map out the terrain of issues and stimulate a public discourse in the most participative, accessible and creative way” (Philippine Primer Online, 2017). The festival featured six plays at the Tanghalang Huseng Batute (CCP Studio Theater), two full-length productions at the Tanghalang Aurelio Tolentino (CCP Little Theater), six feature-films and screened at the Tanghalang Manuel Conde (CCP Dream Theater), and three documentary films.

Curated by Millado and Luarca, participating artists include former Tanghalang Pilipino Artistic Director Herbie Go, Sipat Lawin Ensemble’s Artistic Director J. K. Anicoche, Kolab Company’s Maria Teresa Jamias, playwrights Rody Vera, Maynard Manansala, Reuel Aguila and Nicolas Pichay, University of the Philippines (UP) College of Mass Communication Professor Emeritus Nicanor G. Tiongson, Visual Artists Toym Imao and Leeroy New, television and stage director Andoy Ranay, UP professor and director José Estrella, director Ed Lacson Jr., Tag-Ani Performing Society’s Bonifacio Ilagan, and Rizalina’s older brother, to name a few.

Adaptations of Human Rights Narratives at the Studio Theatre

The festival opened on 8 September, 3 PM, at the CCP Studio Theatre with two plays by the graduating theatre majors of the Philippine High School for the

Arts (PHSA). The first play was Herbie Go's *Pragres* – the story of a government employee from the province based on a short story *Progress* by F. Sionil Jose, National Artist for Literature.

Set in 1974, a government employee needs a promotion due to her family's rising financial needs. In the ministry office, she braves through red tape and corruption. First, a woman clerk has informed her that she is not in the list of the promoted employees. But another clerk tells her a short cut: to drop a twenty-peso bill in a secret drawer somewhere on the same floor where the list is kept.

Second, she is asked to fill up a form on the next floor. Another clerk welcomes her and informs her about the missing form. The clerk then gestures to drop a tip on the drawer. After dropping a five-peso bill, the clerk hands over the form. She is asked to go back the next day to see the chief, who wants to meet her on a Sunday for a treat him to some fancy Japanese restaurant. Just to get with all the hassle, she agrees but to her disbelief, the chief invites her to sleep with him in a motel near the restaurant. Otherwise, no signed papers will be released. On her way to the province, she gets the signed papers and places them in her bag. She walks her way home instead of riding the usual tricycle. Suddenly, a man comes out from the dark alley and grabs her bag.

Directed by Sipat Lawin Ensemble's J. K. Anicoche, this satire on the lazy government employees and the entire government bureaucracy under Marcos's *Bagong Lipunan* (The New Society) program, was first staged at the CCP through the collaboration of Tanghalang Pilipino (CCP's resident theatre company) and the PHSA students in 2008 and had a national tour in 2009 with Skyzx Labastilla performing the role of the government employee.

Bagong Lipunan was Marcos's administrative vision during his second term as President. Based on Suharto's New Order Administration in Indonesia, Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward and Kim Il Sung's Juche, *Bagong Lipunan* urged the poor and the privileged to work as one for the common goals of society and to achieve the liberation of the Filipino people through self-realization. Marcos used the Martial Law to fulfill his vision of a new society (Sicat, 2014; Mijares, 1976/2017).

In a conversation with the play's dramaturg, Tess Jamias (personal communication, 28 September 2017) notes that "the play ridicules the concept of progress in the context of the Philippine government". She continues: "The play is set in 1974. It's 2017, and yet we are still experiencing the same 'progress,' aren't we?"

The second play *Bata, Banta, Bantay, Tayo, Tayog, Bantayog* (Child, Warning, Guard, Poised, Monument) is a devised piece by Sipat Lawin

Ensemble based on research and data on human rights violations during the Martial Law, personal experiences of political detainees and families of the disappeared and the Tasaday Hoax.

The first short piece is devised by Ainah Remonte who researched on the lives of the Martial Law victims listed on a memorial wall found in the Bantayog ng mga Bayani (Heroes Monuments). Side by side the devise are different posts of the Marcos apologists who continue to shape a revised history. These posts call upon everyone to forget the horrors of the Martial Law (including the current President himself and his chief of police) and to forgive those who were involved in it for the country to move forward. As invoked in the devised piece, these posts are cited as calls for a more progressive nation.

The second piece is a short monologue by Kyrie Samodio based on the imagined final hours of Boyet Mijares, who was kidnapped and tortured to death after his father Primitivo Mijares wrote the infamous book *Conjugal Dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos and Imelda Marcos* (1976/2017), the first scholarly work that directly attacks Marcos's dictatorship.

The third piece is a devised by Tomas Santos who took inspiration from a Facebook post by Issa Lopez. The post was a reaction to those who are trying to eradicate the Martial Law as a socio-political turmoil in the modern history of the country. Lopez was born in a prison cell in 1980. Her mother was a student activist during Marcos's regime and in one political demonstration at UP Los Baños, the university she was captured and detained.

The fourth piece by James Lanate interpreted the Tasaday Culture, a fabricated narrative and culture by the Marcos regime in order for the world to turn its eyes to the Philippines, into a dance-drama. Today, the Tasaday history is considered one of the most discussed hoaxes in world history.

At 8 PM, the festival had a twin-bill presentation of Rody Vera's *Indigo Child* (directed by José Estrella) and Maynard Manansala's *Tao Po (Anybody Home?)*, directed by Ed Lacson Jr.). The plays present contrasting images of human rights violations: the former, during the Marcos regime and the latter, an exposition of the human rights violations encountered under the present administration.

Indigo Child brings its audience to the inner psyche of a woman named Felisa (performed by Skyzx Labastilla), an activist during the Marcos regime and was tortured through electrocution. Felissa is undergoing shock therapy as treatment for bipolar disorder due to multiple traumas. Helping and accompanying her in the hospital is her son Jerome (performed by Rafael Tibayan) – who doubles as the play's narrator. The shock therapy brings back

the horrors she encountered with a commander named Kidlat, who during the most traumatic experience she went through as an activist, raped her. Towards the play's end, it is revealed that Commander Kidlat is Jerome's father; hence the moniker indigo child.

In contrast, Maynard Manansala's *Tao Po* is a series of four short monologues based on the current human rights violations allegedly committed by the current administration: the extra judicial killings (EJK) as a result of the government's war-on-drugs. The play is a product of a series of interviews and field work documented by playwright Manansala, producer and actor Mae Paner (popularly known as Juana Change), playwright Rody Vera (dramaturg in the play), and filmmaker Moira Lang.

The first monologue is the story of a photo-journalist, invited to be a resource speaker in his *alma mater*. In the monologue, he narrates how his editor-in-chief questions his work ethics because of his very personal involvement in the EJK beat. The second monologue is the story of a zumba instructor haunted by her husband and her son, victims of summary killings. The third is the story of a policeman who lives a double life – as a law enforcer and as a hit man. Finally, a girl who pays tribute to EJK victims buried in the infamous and notorious *tokhang* wall where her parents are also buried is performed as the last monologue.

Tokhang is a combination of two Cebuano words: *toktok* (to knock) and *hangyo* (to request). It was first used in Davao City, the hometown of President Duterte. Police officers commonly knock on the door of suspected drug users and dealers to persuade them to stop using or peddling drugs. At present, *tokhang* is attributed with the death list and dead bodies, killed extra judicially (GMA News Online, 2017).

On the other hand, the *tokhang wall* is originally an "apartment tomb" at the Manila North Cemetery. The wall is a series of burial tombs, hence, the moniker "apartment tomb" stack with each other with approximate size of 3.5 feet x 2.5 feet each. Typically, one wall consists of 10 tombs stack from bottom to top and 10 tombs per row. A tomb is known as graveyard for the poor. Many poor Filipinos rent these "apartment tombs" for about Php 10,000.00 a year. Family members of the deceased may rent a tomb up to 5 years. In the Manila North Cemetery, the apartment tomb has become infamous for having buried most of the victims of the *Oplan Tokhang*.

Both *Indigo Child* and *Tao Po!* were also performed on 9 and 17 September at 3 PM, and on 16 September at 8 PM.

On 9 September, Cris Millado's direction of Reuel Aguila's *Maliw* (Enduring) and Nicolas Pichay's *Isang Araw sa Karnabal* (One Day at the

Carnival) were staged. Both plays may be conceived as memorials or tributes to the *desaparecidos* or the disappeared during the Martial Law regime.

Originally directed by Edna Vida Froilan for the Fifth Virgin Labfest or the Festival of New Works at the CCP in 2009, *Maliw* follows the story of a former activist couple whose eldest daughter becomes missing after participating in a public protest against the current administration.

Isang Araw sa Karnabal was also part of the Fifth Virgin Labfest and was restaged in 2012 alongside *Maliw*. Originally performed by Skyzx Labastilla and Paolo O'Hara, this restaging welcomes Sheenley Gener and Yul Servo as the estranged activist-lovers. Two family members from these former lovers went missing during the time of Martial Law. In the play, both decide to meet again to mend broken ties. The play is a poignant testament on how the Martial Law destroyed homes and relationships.

Cris Millado's *Buwan at Baril in E^b Major* (Moon and Gun in E^b Major) had a restaging at the Bantayog ng mga Bayani Auditorium in October 2016. Millado's political play stepped foot at the CCP Studio Theatre on 15 September. Written in 1984 as a commissioned play by the Philippine Educational Theatre Association, *Buwan at Baril in E^b Major* revolves around the lives of eight individuals: a farmer, an urban worker, a priest, a barrio woman, a socialite, a wife of a New People's Army leader, a student activist and a police, and how their everyday life crisscrosses as they search for truth, justice and inner-peace.

The characters symbolize the sectors involved in the anti-Marcos struggle since the 1970s. The play's structure is inspired by the movements of symphony or acts in an opera (hence, the E-flat major in the title) where each character is provided with either a soliloquy or a monologue while background music is reminiscent of the opera tunes mimicking sadness as perceived by the E-flat mode in musical composition.

Originally directed by Apolonio Chua in the original staging, this 2017 staging is directed by theatre turned television and movie director Andoy Ranay. Included in the cast-list of this restaging are television, movie and theatre veterans (Cherrie Pie Picache, Jackie Lou Blanco, Paolo O'Hara, Angeli Bayani, Danilo Mandia, JC Santos, among others) who explicitly proclaim their disgust against historical revisionism and the present day human rights violations as experienced by the nation through the EJKs.

Film Screenings and Escalante Massacre Re-Enactment

Annually, the Negrense community of Escalante City commemorates the massacre through a reenactment. Led by the Negros Theatre League, the reenactment was live-streamed at the CCP Dream Theater.

The reenacted event happened on 20 September 1985. Back then, a group of sugar workers, farmers, fishermen, students and church people staged a public protest in the town center of Escalante City, 105 km from Bacolod City, capital of Negros Occidental, via Western Nautical Highway. The crowd protested against the creation of Negros del Norte. Negrenses (locals of the Negros Island), including those from Negros Oriental believed that the creation of Negros del Norte was a maneuvering of Marcos's cronies to consolidate more power in the island's northernmost region, especially since Northern Negros is known for its abundant sugar plantation.

In front of the town's municipal hall, the protesters set up a human barricade to prevent Marcos's cronies and their paramilitaries to enter the city and the rest of the Northern region. A police car approached the barricade and protest leaders were invited to a negotiation inside the municipal hall but these leaders refused to enter the hall in fear of entrapment.

Mid-afternoon that day, a fire truck arrived and began bombarding the human barricade with high-pressure water. The members of the paramilitary group started throwing tear gas but were unable to disperse the crowd. Some protesters threw back the canisters into the paramilitary forces. Eventually, these gunned men started open-firing leading to the death of 20 protesters.

The streaming of the reenactment is the centerpiece the festival's film-showing component. The film component was divided into two parts: documentaries and feature films about the Martial Law. The featured documentaries were produced by the News and Public Affairs of GMA 7, a popular Philippine television network. Documentaries featured were Howie Severino's documentary about poor families of the casualties of *Oplan Tokhang* billed as *Busal* (Gag); Adolfo Alix Jr.'s 2-hour documentary on the life story of Bonifacio Ilagan titled *Alaala: A Martial Law Special* (Memory); and Howie Sevarino's *Ilaw ng Marawi* (*Light of Marawi*), a documentary on the struggle of the Maranaos on the current war against terrorism.

The following feature-films screened were: Aureaus Solito's *Pisay* (a popular name attributed to the Philippine Science High School, released in 2007), about a group of eight future scientists affected by the Martial Law; Joel Lamangan's *Sigwa* (*Storm*, released in 2010), about the first quarter storm movement of young activists against Marcos in the early 1970s; Chito Roño's *Dekada '70* (*The Decade of the 1970s*, released in 2002), based on the novel of the

same title by Lualhati Bautista depicting the struggle of a mother during the peak of the Martial Law; and Mike de Leon's *Sister Stella L* (1984) about a nun's struggle against injustices and oppressions experienced by factory workers in the nearby convent where she stays. In addition is the staged film version of Rody Vera's *Indigo Child* filmed by Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil.

Aurelio Sedisyoso and Pagsambang Bayan: Remembering the Horrors of Abuses in Philippine History

The festival's centerpiece was the staging of two full productions at the 421-seat CCP Little Theatre: the world premiere of Nicanor G. Tiongson's *Aurelio Sedisyoso (The Seditious Aurelio)* opened on 8 September and the restaging of Bonifacio Ilagan's *Pagsambang Bayan (The Nation's Ecumenical Service)* originally staged in 1977 in Hong Kong in the English language.

Aurelio Sedisyoso is based on the life and works of Aurelio Tolentino, a local playwright and a revolutionist during the turn of the 20th century. The American government labeled Tolentino's plays seditious leading to his imprisonment in 1903. Directed by Cris Millado, Tolentino's life story was devised into a rock-musical in an attempt to tell this important historical narrative relatable to the younger generation.

During Tolentino's time, the theatre was a living newspaper according to theatre historian Doreen G. Fernandez (1996) in her seminal book *Palabas*. The people of the revolution strategically utilized the stage to inform the public about the ongoing revolution and about the enemy's whereabouts – the Spaniards and later the Americans. In many occasions, these artists turned revolutionaries exposed horrors of colonization in their theatre works (Tiatco & Ramolete, 2010).

Tolentino used the traditional theater form *sarsuwela* in exposing colonizers' abuses and oppressions. Ironically, the Spaniards (the first colonizers of the Philippines) introduced the *sarsuwela* in 1878 (Bonifacio-Lapeña, 1972; Tiatco & Ramolete, 2010). The *sarsuwela* is usually "[w]ritten in prose, in one to five acts, narrating the challenges of romantic engagements between idealized Filipino characters, and oftentimes interfused with social, political, economic and cultural issues contextualized within the period's historicity when the play was written" (Tiongson, 2009, p. 11). As stated earlier, Tolentino was one of the first theatre-artists who used the *sarsuwela* into a revolutionary agenda tagged as *drama simbolico* (symbolic drama) (Lapeña-Bonifacio, 1972).

When Spain relinquished its remaining colonies (Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines) to the United States through the Treaty of Paris

signed on 10 December 1898, the revolutionaries were hopeful that the Philippine nation was finally realized. The treaty was signed in Paris on 10 December 1898 as a declaration of peace and a statement of desire to end the state of war that existed between the United States (US) and Spain. Article III of the treaty was supplemented by a convention on 7 November 1900 which stated that Spain ceded the Philippines to the US. In relation, the Americans through then President William McKinley promised a benevolent assimilation, proclaiming that the US was entering the islands not as conquerors but as friends in order to protect the natives, their homelands and personal and religious rights of individual.

However, historian Floro Quibuyen (2008) notes in *A Nation Aborted* that the benevolent assimilation program of McKinley was a lie. The Americans came on the shores of the archipelago to terrorize the natives, even committed what Quibuyen writes as crimes against humanity such as the burning of an entire village in the Visayas, genocide in a Batangas village, massacre in Luzon. In other words, the Americans, in the writing of Quibuyen, came to the islands to replace the colonization modalities of the Spaniards.

Through the theatre, particularly the *sarsuwela*, the ideas of nation and independence were once again conveyed to the common people who were persuaded into action and commitment (Tiatco & Ramolete, 2010, p. 324). It was also reported in Sydney-based Sunday newspaper *The Theatre* that Filipino artists used political commentaries into their costumes:

[They are] so coloured and draped that at a given signal or cue the actors and actresses rush together, apparently without design, and stand swaying in the centre of the stage, close to the footlights, their combination forming a living, moving, stirring picture of the Filipino flag. Only an instant or so does the phantom last, but that one instant is enough to bring the entire house to its feet with yells and cries that are bloodcurdling in their ferocious delight, while the less quick-witted Americans in the audience are wondering what the row is about. (Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996, p. 1)

American viewers would often not easily recognize that something 'subversive' was being communicated. For instance: the use of a sun rising and filling the stage with rosy hues, a statue of the goddess of liberty coming to life

and exhorting the people to conquer and die for her, or a huge eagle threatening to eat the people. These were protestations against the colonial situation under the Americans. For this reason, the American government passed the Act No. 291 or the Sedition Act on 4 November 1901. The Sedition Act disallowed the Filipino people at that time to engage in any form of assemblies (i.e. theatre) especially those that advocated independence.

The staging of *Aurelio Sedisyoso* is a reminder to the audience about the continued oppressions experienced by the nation. Through the devices popularized in the *sarsuwela*, especially the *drama simbolico*, the rock-musical uses symbols to protest the oppressive administration. In the play, symbols are sporadically placed in the set such as a head covered in packaging tape as a reference to the current extra judicial killings encountered by country, designed and executed by installation artist and sculptor Toym Imao.

With an inverse stage orientation, the performance area was placed at the auditorium facing the original stage of the theater. The audience sat on bleachers and white plastic chairs locally known as monoblocs set up on the stage. The structure of the set followed the slope of the auditorium, giving the upper level more focus and perspective. Imao's reinterpretation of the Statue of Liberty was positioned on top of the set, symbolizing the American colonization in the Philippines. The presence of the statue also situated the milieu of the performance: turn of the 20th century or the beginning of the American imperialism in the Philippines. Juxtaposing the Statue of Liberty is the installation *Desaparecidos* – a collection of 43-figure sculptures depicting the disappeared activists and whose bodies were never found to date. These figures are scattered throughout the performance space.

This set-up offers many symbolical reading. We feel that the design of the set is envisioned to be an installation memorial for the victims of the Martial Law. In a sense, Imao could have sensed that the oppressive state of the American imperialism reverberated Marcos's oppressions and abuses. Besides, Imao's *Desaparecidos* was earlier installed at the Bantayog ng mga Bayani Memorial Center in Diliman, Quezon City for the whole month of September 2015, 43 years after the declaration of Martial Law.

Another way of looking at the parallelism: the installation to the reinterpretation of the Statue of Liberty are also paying homage to the victims of the extra judicial killings attributed to President Duterte's war-on-drugs. In short, the set was also a memorial to those killed since the landslide win of President Duterte.

The inversion on other hand may be inferred as a memorial to Tolentino. First, the Little Theatre is named after Aurelio Tolentino. We

believe the staging may be suggestive that audience members should remember Tolentino was a man of the stage – he was a playwright, a director and an *apuntador* (prompter). By sitting on the stage of the auditorium named after him is perhaps, a way of remembering. Second and perhaps the most important, the inversion is an invitation to reflect on the relationship of the stage and resistance, revolution and dissents. Tolentino resisted, revolted and dissented using the stage against colonizers. In a way, the staging reminds its audience – especially the Filipino audience how the theatre may continuously fight for this nation in times of oppression.

Closing the festival was Bonifacio Ilagan's *Pagsambang Bayan*. Staged from 22 to 24 September 2017, *Pagsambang Bayan* is the first play that directly criticized Marcos's Martial Law (Cultural Center of the Philippines [CCP], 2017). Original staged in 1977, Bonifacio – the older brother of the festival's honoree – wrote *Pagsambang Bayan* right after his release from prison. During the press conference for the festival at the CCP, Ilagan said the Bible was the only book he and other detainees were allowed to read. Reading the Bible served as his impetus to write *Pagsambang Bayan*, which he says, is structured like a real mass.

Like his sister Rizalina, Bonifacio was captured and tortured by the Philippine Constabulary during the Martial Law period. He was a member of Panday Sining, the cultural arm of Kabataang Makabayan (KM), which initiated assemblies through what they called *dulansangan* or street theater. He wrote *Masaker sa Araw ng Paggawa* (*Massacre on Labour Day*) staged at Plaza Miranda, Manila. This production made the constabulary suspicious of him: the staging showed actors performing labourers, wearing red silk kerchiefs on their wrists. For the administration, this signified (and still is) arm struggle against the government.

Pagsambang Bayan's first staging was under Leo Rimando's direction, as stated earlier, in Hong Kong. Nonetheless, Ilagan felt it was necessary for the Filipino audience to see the play. Fellow activist-artist Behn Cervantes directed the Philippine premier of the play. *Pagsambang Bayan* was translated into Filipino making the play more comprehensible to the audience. This staging led to Cervantes's imprisonment in 1977.

The leading player is a church leader, wearing a traditional church vestment most of the play. The members of the congregation of *Pagsambang Bayan* are the *magsasaka* (farmer) *manggagawa* (workers), *pesante* (peasants), *katutubo* (indigenous peoples) and even middle class office workers. Following the tradition of *tula-dula* (poem-play) popularized by the University of the

Philippines Repertory Company (UPRC), the play revolves around a discussion on the nation's condition during Martial law.

Student-members of the UPRC introduced the *tula-dula* in UPD primarily to protest against the increase of any university fee and the suppression of academic freedom. Later on, UPRC members extended the performance to larger social issues. During the Martial Law, *tula-dula* became so popular that many student organizations in UPD started adapting it to their public protests on campus and to the streets of the metropolis (Tiongson, 1994). A *tula-dula* performance is simple: a performer dramatically reads a poem and supporting performers mime the actions of the poem.

In *Pagsambang Bayan*, the priest is the main reader and the congregation enacts the epic-like poem of the text. The congregation is not only miming what the priest is dramatically rendering. Members of the congregation function like a chorus. They are invited to argue with the church leader who often quotes biblical passages to analogize the oppressive nature of the regime. In the end, the priest joins the sectorial representatives and takes off his garments and wears the same shirt the *magsasaka* wears. He also brings out a red handkerchief and wraps it around his wrist – alluding to the similar arm struggle of his earlier play at the Plaza Miranda.

The 2017 staging presented allusions to Martial Law as it opened with images of the dictator being buried at the National Heroes' Cemetery. Overall, the play invites the audience to reflect: have we learned from the Martial Law? Performers sing familiar tunes alluding to both Martial Law and Duterte's administration: *Bayan Ko* (My Country), popularized during the 1986 People Power Revolution that overthrew the dictator and the church-song *Pananagutan* (We are all Accountable), which invites the audience to remember "*tayong lahat ay may pananagutan sa isa't isa*" (we have responsibility to take care of each other).

Performing Human Rights, Performing Morality

What is the relationship of theatre and human rights? Particularly, what role does theatre possess in safeguarding human rights? Florian N. Becker, Paola S. Hernández and Brenda Werth (2013) argue that theatre does not simply prevent any human rights abuse. They write, "we have no naïve trust in the power of theater – or art more generally – to prevent human rights abuses" (p. 2). Becker, Hernández and Werth even argue the minority place of theatre in human rights awareness when compared to traditional media and new media of the 21st century (*i.e.* social media). The theatre has a small audience against the audience reach of film, television, radio, newsprint and the electronic

media. In the Philippines, theater is not a popular medium for advocacies and consciousness awareness. More so, social drama and original Filipino theatre works are struggling for audiences as compared to the popular theatre works imported from Broadway and the West End.

However, no one can deny the special place of theatre in human rights concerns. There are theatre personalities around the world who were exiled (and even killed) because they were either fighting for human rights or they exposed the people responsible for human rights abuses: Augusto Boal (Brazil), Ariel Dorfman (Chile), Vaclav Havel (Czech Republic), Wole Soyinka (Nigeria), Ngugi Wa Thing'o (Kenya), Safdar Hashmi (India), Kuo Pao Kun (Singapore), W. S. Rendra (Indonesia). In some cases, some theatre personalities were tortured because of their political messages against the perpetrators of human rights violations. Behn Cervantes and Bonifacio Ilagan are two examples of theatre figures in the Philippines who were captured and tortured because they exposed Marcos as the perpetrators of human rights violations in their theatre works.

Joi Barrios (2013) points out that the theatre became highly significant during the Martial Law regime in the Philippines. The narratives of performances share vicarious experiences to audience members especially since the plays were based on real-life experiences researched by the playwrights. At the same time, the plays "were staged at a time of print and film censorship, making theater an effective medium" (p. 197). Most importantly, Barrios (2013) argues that these plays "testify to the effective use of protest art and literature in the struggle against militarization" (p. 197).

The role of the theatre in the presentations of human rights concerns is impeccable. Many times, it represents what Paul Rae (2009) calls *who did what to whom* or the staging of human rights champion and how he or she fought for the restoration of such rights. Other instances are performances of specific abuses on a particular context as implied by *what to whom* (p. 20).

A theatre performance involving human rights abuses often revolves around the presentations of some socio-political dilemma experienced by ordinary people (and in many instances, the activists who constantly reveal the misdeeds of the perpetrators such as the government) in the social sphere. In this regard, audience members are seemingly prepared to confront these dilemmas through the actions of the characters presented onstage. Theatre artists are presenting these scenarios as a rehearsal for the search of social justice in the community. At the same time, these are reminders of the mistakes and misdeeds experienced by the community in the past. Often, these

are misdeeds by an authoritarian figure or a dictator who claimed so many lives.

In this regard, the human rights concerns onstage are a reminder of how fragile and vulnerable the human condition is. At the same time, these performances provide a reflection on the precarity of our conditions as humans in the social sphere: Judith Butler writes:

Those who commit acts of violence are surely responsible for them; they are not dupes or mechanisms of an impersonal social force, but agents with responsibility. On the other hand, these individuals are formed, and we would be making a mistake if we reduced their actions to purely self-generated acts of will or symptoms of individual pathology of 'evil'. (Butler, 2004, p. 15)

By presenting the past mistakes committed by the perpetrators, the audience members are being prepared to rethink conceptions of responsibility and agency. In this regard, the theatre becomes a rehearsal for responsibility doubled with care. The theatre also becomes instrumental in the rethinking of subjectivity as co-equal with other subjectivities: that we belong to a common goal of humanity – to live freely in a just and caring world.

More so, these performances are enactment of collective trauma in an immediate, intimate and intense ways. This way, the theatre vis-à-vis human rights becomes an indication of what Diana Taylor (2003) asserts as embodied practices, which allows and offers “a way of knowing” (p. 13), generating a link between the performer and the audience “through sensorial intensity, social intimacy, and the joint physical presence of bodies on and offstage” (Becker, Hernández, & Werth, 2013, p. 3).

What is more important in this understanding of human rights vis-à-vis the theatre is the latter's capacity to create a community. The theatre arguably projects a community: a community of performers plus the audience members who are engaged in the creation of public imaginings. And since theatre involves public imaginings via representation and presentation of imagined human characters (i.e. figures involving human rights abuses), audience members and performers alike are implicated in some questions about morality.

Nicholas Ridout (2009) explains that the theatre is about doing, acting, performing and perhaps even becoming. Questions involving morality are generally also about doing, acting, performing and even becoming.

Fundamentally, some moral questions like “How do I act?” “How do I engage with others?” “What is the right thing to do?” are often implicated in the theatre. Arguably, the moral is in the vicariousness of the experience, which is also a call of the “imagination” to put oneself in the other’s (imagined or fictional other) shoes as philosopher Hannah Arendt (1964/1994) puts it in a different context in her analysis of the banality of evil during the trial of Otto Adolf Eichmann, one of the founding leaders of the Holocaust.

Concluding Reflections

As embodied in *Pista Rizalina*, the conception of morality vis-à-vis the theatre and human rights is broadly based on an encounter that gives importance to the conception and materiality of the *other*, governed by a disposition of responsibility and care. This is because the other is seen as an extension of the *self*. In relation, the individual firstly encounters the face of the *other* as it “constitutes the central zone of the body where our eyes and our mouth are located and play of features takes place” (Waldenfels, 2002, p. 64). The face, adds Waldenfels, “is something present but, at the same time, it is the other’s corporeal self-presence” (p. 64).

In *Totality and Infinity*, Emmanuel Levinas (1979) asserts that, through the face, the human person recognizes the transcendence and heteronomy of the other. With this recognition, we activate our moral responsibilities to the other—the responsibility to humanity. Relating the theatre to Levinasian morality, Sir Anril Tiatco (2015) asserts:

Looking at the faces of the actors [...], one becomes conscious of a gaze, which is both interrogative and imperative. The gaze from the stage seems to implore: *Just look at me; do not violate me!* It is here that transcendence is activated. The encounter of the face causes the freedom of the will to falter and opens an “I” to goodness. (pp. 162 – 63, emphasis provided)

In relation to human rights, the theatre is a reminder that there are moments in the history of humanity where individuals became superfluous and grounded existence with what Hannah Arendt (1964/1994) calls radical evil. It is a moment when one realizes because “something went dead, something is still crying”, there is the establishment of hell on earth, not ultimately because of power or self-interest but because of the loss of self-interest and communal bonds (Whitefield, 1980, p. 102). Thus, the relationship of theater and human

rights is suggestive of a communion between the audience and the performance where everyone remembers *hells on earth*, a picture of humanity's inhuman character such as the atrocities of Marcos and the human rights abuses of the current administration in the case of *Pista Rizalina*.

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