

DANCE OF THE MADWOMAN: Social Realism in Agnes Locsin's "Sayaw Sabel" A Review

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Davao-based choreographer Agnes Locsin sets out into a new dance project that speaks of her shift from big-time CCP theater shows to more intimate and low-key artistic collaborations, which is the trend in most independent contemporary productions in the world today. *Sayaw Sabel*, Locsin's recent showcase of dances at the new and intimately small PETA Theater Center, finds her co-choreographing with former Ballet Philippines dancer Dwight Rodrigazo. In this production, Locsin directs a series of seven dances that take inspiration from the visual art of National Artist Benedicto Cabrera, who has done a series of works on "Sabel", a trash lady who has been a major subject in Cabrera's paintings, inspired by a real-life scavenger he photographed and sketched in 1965. *Sabel*, in this dance drama, becomes the main character to express the daily tragedies and tribulations that contemporary Filipinos go through in their everyday lives.

Sabel was alternately portrayed by veteran theater actors Melvin Lee and Maribel Legarda, while the dancers were led by former Ballet Philippines members Judell De Guzman-Sicam, Christine Crame, Annette Cruz-Mariano, Perry Sevidal, Camille Ordinario-Joson, Dwight Rodrigazo, with the addition of newcomer Monique Uy.

Music was by Louie Ocampo and Joey Ayala with a witty sound design by Jakob Rodriguez which included excerpts from several OPM songs.

The dance comes close to a social realist performance for its timely commentary on various issues that plague Philippine society, namely rat-race competition, substance abuse and addiction, broken relationships, and the OFW issue. With Locsin's Grahamesque technique that uses angularity and contraction of bodies, together with mimetic movements that mirror everyday actions, the dance was juxtaposed against a backdrop of mostly black and grey stage set with an enlarged version of Bencab's visual rendition of Sabel. The largely black, grey, and off-white hues of the actor's and dancers' costumes further heightened the shadowy, nearly tragic mood of the dance-drama, making it an intriguing combination of minimalist and surrealist styles.

Sabel, as the center of the dance narrative, is the persona that threads through the gaps that bring close the seven solo dances. As the first character to enter the stage, Sabel was portrayed as a madwoman of the streets, saddened and burdened by the load of both physical and psychic garbage that she carries around with her. Then enter the seven dancers, each one cleverly portraying an individual persona with layers of stories and conundrums to unpack, as revealed in each dance.

In *Kayod*, for one, portrayed by De Guzman-Sicam, the dancer is depicted as a working woman, utilizing fast-paced, nearly mechanical movements that mimic the incessant typing on a computer desktop. Sometimes sitting on a swivel chair, at times running around to do her multiple chores, the dancer as modern day mom and corporate workaholic finds herself torn between a career and her role as a homemaker. At the end of the day, we see her carrying an imaginary baby. And yet she ends up doing her caregiving duties under her office swivel chair, cluing us into the desperation of her double-burden that is a shared experience among contemporary working women.

Rodrigazo, who happens to be the lone male dancer in the production, deftly brought to life the personality of a rugby addict in the streets in the dance *Batak*. With bloodshot eyes that darted suspiciously from here to there, the character is protective of his valued piece of addictive poison. Rodrigazo's

movements charted the lows and short-lived “highs” of the substance addict, numbing him from the pangs of anger. With the clever music collage that included Ric Segreto’s popular love ditty “It’s Your Smile,” the dance was a caricature of the illusions and desperation of the morally decrepit street tramp attempting to escape the cruel realities of urban poverty.

Another dance, *Abandonada*, was rendered by mestiza-looking dancer Camille Crame. As the title implies, it is a dance about the emotional drama of an abandoned woman lover. Kicking, shrieking, crying, stomping – these were some of the movements dominating the dance – all expressions of the longing and misery that are symptoms of severe separation anxiety. The humorous inclusion of lines from the popular OPM rock song “Ang Halik Mo, Na-Mimiss Ko,” the woman at one point swings like a rock star singing the blues away with this song reminiscent of the cheap *bakya* crowd. The dance was a humorous lampoon on how wretched and hopeless people can get when it comes to matters of the heart.

Uy led the rendition of *Bagong Bayani*. It was a play of movement with the *balikbayan box*, an icon representing the overseas working Filipino, who in turn is dubbed as the hero of the new century, salvaging the Philippine economy with his hard earned dollars. In its use of jumps and gestures with the iconic package on the dancers’ heads, the dance was a playful sketch of how OFWs manage to live in a culture of solidarity with other overseas workers, while working hard to bring home the bacon for the families they have left behind.

Sevidal, the oldest and most seasoned in this batch of dancers, artfully interpreted in *Sino Ka* a woman experiencing the geriatric symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease. Her slow movements and dazed eyes went fittingly with the melancholy piano music. Sevidal rolled across the floor and sat up to whistle the tune of an old kundiman “Hindi Kita Malimot.” Later, Sabel herself joins Sevidal as she sang lines of the song with tears and desolation on her face. It was a poignant scene of two women attempting to console each other.

The final solo is by Ordinario in the dance *Ako Una* which shows the physical and psychic makeup of the competitive spirit, suggestive of the so-called ‘Filipino crab-mentality.’ Wearing a sports headband and moving with gestures used in swimming and kickboxing, Ordinario represented

the mentality of a person living under a star complex, always wanting to be ahead of the rat race, but at the expense of everybody else. Five other dancers would later enter to begin a fight with the aggressive and antagonistic Ordinario, until she finally gives in and gives up to the wild clamor of the people against her forceful personality.

The final dance was a reprise of all the seven dancers, together with Sabel, where all the dancers crowd around to give Sabel a group embrace, as if to comfort her amidst the unending tragedies that the world has shown her. Overall, *Sabel, the dance*, is a story of the daily mishaps of contemporary Philippine life. It enjoins us to empathize with the spirit of Sabel. For although a madwoman, behind her dismal facade lies a strong soul who has survived the roughness of life made bearable by her own song, a muted cry, and a few moments of laughter in between.

The persona of Sabel is also reminiscent of her European literary counterpart, the madwoman Bertha who is locked up in the attic in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*¹. Sisa, the classic 'Filipina mother as madwoman' whom we have read in Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*, of course, comes closer to Locsin's modern characterization of Sabel. This time, however, this modern-day Sisa is seen freely roaming the urban jungle, not confined to an attic as Bertha is, nor is she on the lookout for her two lost sons as Sisa is. Sabel is totally on her own, choosing to find spaces of solidarity with other people in her midst whose lifestories seem to mirror her own.

Though not an overt feminist choreographer, as she would openly admit in interviews², Locsin's use of predominantly female dancers in this work, not only turns the marginalized woman of the streets into a heroine, it also offers us a paradoxical imagery of how 'woman' is an active signifier of both power and disempowerment. What with Sabel's power to articulate and dance with and beyond her grief over a society that has abandoned her and put her and others at life's edge.

Sayaw Sabel was also shown at the CCP Little Theater on August 11, 2010 and had a regional tour of the Luzon provinces from September to October through the CCP Outreach and Exchange Division. This dance offering may serve to awaken social awareness among a people constantly sedated by the

strange mixture of technology, crass commercialism and traditional politics. Sabel personifies the survivor spirit that mirrors back to us the weather-beaten yet tenacious strength of a people caught in the hegemonizing culture of globalization and its attendant perils.

ENDNOTES

¹A landmark feminist criticism on this was offered by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in 1979 with their seminal book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, which examines Victorian literature from a feminist perspective.

²In personal interviews conducted by the author in 2002-03, Agnes Locsin expressly said that she is not consciously informed by feminist politics in her works. Though she is not against any feminist framework, she opined that it is the job of art critics to interpret her works as such.