

## **A Narrative of Center and Periphery: Dance=Pull's Contemporary Directional Motivation<sup>xvi</sup>**

***Ruth Jordana L. Pison***

Ruth Jordana L. Pison is an Associate Professor at the Department of English and Comparative Literature, University of the Philippines, Diliman, where she teaches courses on Philippine literature, Philippine women writers in English, and literary criticism. She earned both her M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Comparative Literature in the same university. Her books entitled *Alternative Histories: Martial Law Novels as Counter-Memory* and *Dangerous Liaisons: Sexing the Nation in Philippine Novels by Women 1993-2006* were published by the UP Press in 2005 and 2010, respectively. She has conducted research on contemporary dance in the Philippines, focusing on five groups/choreographers in Manila and in the regions—Dance Forum, UP Dance Company, Airdance, Dance=Pull, Noel Garrovillo Dance Center, and Agnes Locsin.

So much has been written about the nation and history vis-à-vis the other fields in the humanities and arts. As a discursive practice, the nation continues to be the crucible of many cultural, historical, socio-political, religious, economic, gender, racial, and sexual discourses. Dance, as a performing art, occupies a peculiar location within and vis-à-vis the discourse of the nation. An ephemeral form, dance has elicited various, and even contradictory, valuations; most of the time it

is considered a mere form of entertainment. It is undeniable, though, that dance has articulated and informed our ideas of the nation and nationhood. Seemingly marginal to other forms of arts and cultural practices, dance has always been embedded in our daily lives, as performance or otherwise. This notwithstanding, it has not been extensively “discoursed” about. Aside from the works on traditional Philippine dances as expressions of the Filipino identity—our folk dance groups have earned international recognition through the years—seldom have other dances in the country been extensively studied as performances of the nation.

That the narrative of the nation may be cathected to that of dance is not surprising considering how the latter, from its earliest form as ritual art, has remained an important part in the emergence of nation states and the process of modernization. Because the body is a powerful medium for expressing social values, it was important in the nationalist framework of modernization in the 20th century. According to dance critics and historians, the “aura of the body” was embraced by national movements to represent and even solidify national values. Thus, we find the Philippine state, despite its lukewarm attitude towards the arts, still supportive of the idea of a “national dance company.”

Against this background (e.g., the nation projected in the choreographies of a national dance company like the Bayanihan), this paper will look at how Philippine contemporary dance can respond to the nation-state’s “narrative” (i.e., the state’s political and cultural discourses which have enabled it to project itself as a nation) by presenting the other trajectories and issues embodied in the Philippines’ imagining of itself. It offers a space within which the narrative of the nation, one which is different from that deployed by the state, is created.

The cultural practice of dancer-choreographer and former *premier danseur* of Ballet Philippines, Dwight Rodrigazo, will be the focus of this discussion. His practice provides an example of an artist's conscious decision to move from the "center" (Manila and Europe) to the "periphery" (Bacolod) of the arts, to create art out of the landscape of his hometown.

What makes a danseur and choreographer from the "center" of the arts decide to return to his home in the West Visayas? And what makes a prodigal son reconcile with **what** he ran away from? Only a commitment to art and a strong conviction that an artist and his work are integral to the life of the nation are perhaps strong enough reasons to push a person to start anew and find ways of rooting his art in his hometown. This is the story of Dwight Rodrigazo, the dancer known as the "Livewire character" and "jumper" of Neo-Ethnic choreographer Agnes Locsin (Saspa 23), the "airborne, evocative and strong live-wire dancer" (Siebel 16), and the "Wild Man Dwight" (Torres 8). To say that Rodrigazo's life is for the movies is an understatement. And though he has been the subject of a number of feature articles, the story of the creation of Dance=Pull, a contemporary dance group and school for the performing arts in Bacolod, will not be complete without a re-telling of Rodrigazo's life as a danseur of Ballet Philippines, a scholar of the Brumachon Dance Company of Nantes, France, a master classes student in 2003 at the Place in London and Dance Base in Edinburgh, and one of the artistic directors of E-Dance Theater in 2002 and the Marikina Dance Theater. His is a story of how artists are "positioned through their access to resources," in particular, to economic, political, and cultural sources (Ramsay). And as such, critics must see how he considers contemporary dance and his creations in his own terms.

Bacolod has its share of recognized and well-respected dance artists. Anabele Martinez Cudilla and Lydia M. Gaston,

whose studios continue to be the region's source of pride, were the first teachers of Rodrigazo way back in the early 1980s. And it was the ballet training with them that opened a new world to this dancer who initially refused to have anything to do with dance. He was, by his own admission, the bratty son of a four-time mayor of Murcia, Negros Occidental. It was therefore not surprising that when he was asked to join the dance school of his niece, his immediate response was refusal (Torres 8). This initial vehement reaction gave way to a more positive response when an adolescent Rodrigazo was invited to watch a recital by his half-sister and the fourteen-year-old "fell in love" with one of the young dancers. Despite warnings about being merely a "taga hakwat" (i.e., a person who lifts/carries) of female classmates wearing unattractive swimsuits – and not sexy tights and leotards – Rodrigazo enrolled in a ballet class hoping that he would see the beautiful dancer. The disappointing experience of being made to join a baby ballet class and thus not seeing her at all did not discourage him from exploring the world of dance. At home, he would surreptitiously waltz in his room and lift sacks of rice to develop and strengthen his muscles.

Since then, it has been a difficult love affair with ballet. Rodrigazo's change of heart and interest would have been acceptable to his family had he fallen for a more typical boy's sport. But ballet was ballet. In the eyes of his lawyer-mayor father, his teacher mother, and his brother and sister who eventually became an engineer and lawyer, respectively, ballet was too feminine and impractical. So when his parents discovered that it was ballet in Bacolod that kept him busy, they declared a moratorium on his allowance which forced him to bike from Murcia to Bacolod. One could just imagine the young Rodrigazo passing through fields of sugarcane<sup>xvii</sup> whenever he had classes in the city; it was "like biking from CCP to Paranaque," he recalls decades after (qtd. in Torres 8). This was the beginning of years of hardship for the young boy

from Negros. At seventeen and wanting to join the Cultural Center of the Philippines' dance workshop, he was refused support by his parents. It must have been the exuberance and confidence of youth that convinced him of his ability to survive in Manila with only seven hundred fifty pesos (Torres 6). He ran away from home, went to Manila, got the CCP scholarship, and spent his days at the studio and nights in Luneta—he would sleep in front of the Malate church and on the stairs of the Legaspi Towers (Torres 8). This was his life for three years in Manila. His financial predicament eventually reached the officers of the dance company who decided to raise his allowance and allowed him to stay at the CPP for several months. It was only when he became a member of the company in 1990 that he was able to afford to share an apartment with his fellow dancers. The previous year, he had returned to Bacolod and made peace with his family who had become more accepting of his chosen career (Torres 9). On their part, it was perhaps more an act of resignation than acceptance, an acknowledgement of the fact that they could change neither his mind nor heart.

The years between the mid-1990s and early 2000 saw the peak of Rodrigazo's career—he became one of the *premier danseurs* of Ballet Philippines, the star of a number of the company's productions. But he eventually got exhausted and decided to leave Ballet Philippines, contemplated on giving up dance but took the offer of Powerdance director Douglas Nieras to be a company member. He later joined the *Rama Sita* production, established the E-dance Theatre with Paul Morales and Gerald Mercado in 2002, joined Airdance when it was not yet a company, and eventually became its associate artistic director and chief choreographer between 2002-2006. The trajectory of his career in the span of more than a decade was one impelled by a free spirit. It was a career that was driven by a ceaseless search for dance and its relevance to something bigger than himself.

At thirty-six, Rodrigazo, who had spent more than half his life in Manila, decided to return to Bacolod for good. After his successful choreographic works and performances with Airdance, he was satisfied with his achievements; he believed he had fulfilled his dreams. These dreams, though, were only partly fulfilled because he came to realize that he could go home and start a new life. Already with a name (i.e., Dance=Pull) in mind for his envisioned dance company, he waited for financial assistance from his mother so he could set up his own studio. He waited a year until he finally got word from home: support would be given only if he sets up the studio in Bacolod.

Rodrigazo's Dance=Pull company has come a long way since he and his wife returned to Bacolod in 2006. Having been trained in ballet, modern, and contemporary dance<sup>xviii</sup>—Rodrigazo has been heavily influenced by Agnes Locsin, the mother of neo-ethnic dance in the Philippines—he has kept all three dance genres strong in his school. Like Locsin in Davao and contemporary dancer and choreographer Noel Garrovillo in Koronadal, Rodrigazo acknowledges that ballet is what most students and parents look for. But the decision to make his school known as a ballet and contemporary dance school is an articulation of what he will always love (i.e., ballet) and what he thinks complements the Filipino body and talent (i.e., contemporary dance). Hence, the ballet classes<sup>xix</sup> offered by his school and the contemporary dance company he has established. The school, which has both paying students and scholars (i.e., around half of them), offers not only ballet but also hip-hop, break dance, contemporary, and jazz.

Because Rodrigazo cannot imagine himself without any choreographic output, he has made sure that he has a stable pool of dancers with whom he can work. Although some of his dancers have left, new ones have joined the company which in

the past years has strengthened its contemporary choreographies. Looking closely at the set up of Dance=Pull, one realizes that Rodrigazo has built an infrastructure which addresses both artistic and material needs of its members. Thus, when his company members are strong enough and ready to be on their own, he sends them to Airdance and other contemporary dance companies in Manila because he believes that there is always room for growth and that dancers have to be exposed to new ideas and different movement vocabularies. Being based in the regions is not an excuse for artists to be complacent because intellectual relaxation is inexcusable. And in turn, the flow of artists from the regions has slightly altered the contours and narrative of dance in the center/Manila. As these performers join contemporary dance companies such as Airdance, they take with them not only particular experiences of their bodies and aesthetic strategies, but also specific realities of Bacolod which inevitably inform their work in Manila.

Rodrigazo's life, however, is one of reversal. He himself had gone to the so-called center of the arts—not just in the Philippines, but in Europe as well—but decided to return to Bacolod and create art out of the landscape of his hometown. He strengthened his contemporary dance repertoire because he realized that ballet, which is his real love, is for “whites.” In a humorous self-deprecating tone, he says that the audience of a ballet performance will always ask: “Where is the prince?” And because he could hardly be considered a “prince,” he had years ago decided to excel in a dance genre that has more possibilities for a postcolonial artist like himself: contemporary dance. Besides, ballet according to Rodrigazo, has been quite exhausted in the West. European artists have gone to the East to look for material; a company in the Netherlands even performed “Sayaw sa Bangko, and no less than the famous Mikhail Baryshnikov has moved to contemporary dance.<sup>xx</sup> This is a description of what has characterized the encounter between mainstream European and North American

choreography and non-western choreography. The West has always “assimilated” the latter and other “sub-cultural influences.” Even before multiculturalism became a buzzword, modern dance choreographer Ruth St. Dennis was moved by classical Indian dance, and the precursor of contemporary dance, Martha Graham, already spoke of her indebtedness to the conventions of Southeast Asian dance (Copeland 57). In fact, Ted Shawn, an innovator in American modern dance, explored the Mountain Province of the Philippines to observe several indigenous dances (Villaruz 77). The West drawing on the aesthetics and dance traditions of the East reinforced Rodrigazo’s belief that the Philippines has so much to offer a contemporary choreographer like him. He was convinced that if he wanted to be true to the pursuit of his art and its relevance to his realities, he had to find a suitable form. He already knew this when he was with Airdance and has always been vocal about the imperative of finding a “distinct Pinoy identity” in dance.

Rodrigazo might be considered fortunate to have Bacolod as a source of his choreographic material, and his training in modern and contemporary dance complements his Bacolod tableaux. Contemporary dance’s receptiveness to a range of styles has allowed him to meld movement vocabularies and create works that would pertain to the contemporary realities of Negros. He admits, though, that he had no clear vision of what he wanted when he returned home. He might have been vocal about Airdance’s need to acquire an identity as a contemporary dance company, but he had no particular idea as to what identity he wanted for Dance=Pull. It was Bacolod’s landscape that defined the contour of his repertoire. It was the place’s history—both past and present—that has dictated the company’s sense of the “contemporary.” And though “contemporary” may have basic characteristics recognized by dancers and choreographers, the term must be understood in its specific context and how it is understood by artists who are

based in different regions in the country. As most definitions of terms are contingent on certain conditions (e.g., socio-cultural realities that affect the mode of production of a work), “contemporary” does not carry with it an immutable meaning which cuts across localities, let alone nations. “Contemporary” emerges as a result of interactions, of what artists bring to a space (e.g., their aesthetic encounters) and is therefore provisional.

Such specificity is in Rodrigazo’s aesthetics in *Karga Tapas*, a piece that was featured during the CCP’s 3rd Independent Contemporary Festival in 2008. Moved by the miserable lives of the *sakadas* in the sugar haciendas of Negros, *Karga Tapas*’s raw and muscular movements point to the punishing nature of work in the sugarcane fields. Rodrigazo grew up seeing the contractual or *pakyaw* workers who were paid depending on how fast they weeded the land, planted *patdan*, and how much sugar cane they harvested and loaded onto trucks. Upon returning to his hometown, he rediscovered the seeming spectral presence of these *sakadas* – their sunburnt faces and their layers upon layers of clothing not quite enough to protect their skin from the scorching heat of the sun. He then transformed these mental images into a choreography that is almost ritualistic in its rendering of the act of cutting sugarcane. The continuous cutting (i.e., “*tapas*”) and carrying (i.e., “*karga*”) of canes were translated into sinewy, weighty, and earth-bound movements, hypnotic in their repetition. The impetus for the dance movement of this twenty-minute piece is derived from the lay of the land; kinetic empathy not just with the dancers but with the situation of the *sakadas* further reinforced by the percussive music.<sup>xxi</sup>

In *Birds of the Mind* – a lighter piece likewise inspired by Bacolod’s terrain – Rodrigazo captures the humming and tweeting sounds of birds and their flapping and swooping motions in flight. The concept is deceptively simple but he

gives these birds distinct human characteristics, even peculiarities, some of which represent human follies. But there is something to be said about the wit and humor of this piece performed at the CCP during the 4th Dance Festival in 2009. The titles of the short pieces comprising the show reveal Rodrigazo's deep understanding of Pinoy culture and habits: "Flock of Birds" makes fun of how people convince each other to follow traditions, "Birds Nest" mocks the sexual hypocrisy of Philippine society by showing how the seemingly conservative Pinoys actually have a penchant for motels, and "Kalapating Mababang Lipad" alludes to women who have fallen from grace. Two pieces have more general themes: while "Love Birds" articulates the common need for affection and the relentless search for the ideal, "Dove" points to the idea of purifying and cleansing oneself. Rodrigazo calls these pieces "vignettes" which reveal the peculiar ability of Filipinos to laugh at themselves. In contrast to *Karga Tapas's* solid movement is *Birds of the Mind's* more airy and flighty gestures. In these two pieces, we see two different vocabularies emerging from the same landscape that is Bacolod.

In his write-up for *Birds of the Mind*, Rodrigazo explains that the choreography is his attempt "at something 'light'; for once, no exaggeration on the movements and emotions. This is what is real... what is now." But the question is: What is the 'now' or the 'contemporary' in his choreographies? It is their subject matter and form—the intelligent use of the discourse of contemporary dance to articulate what besets and characterizes Philippine society, from the most serious issues to the lightest, and even funniest cultural eccentricities?

He describes his choreographic style as "directional motivation" — "It's not just going against natural impulses, the way modern rebelled against the classical form. Instead, I'm seeking other directions... other directions in which movement develops. Directions we won't usually take but also directions

we can revisit. This is not just for my choreography, though” (Goethe-Institut). This technique’s name –dance and pull– which he uses for his company and school is actually based on ballet. But he has transformed it so much so that it could be considered a distinguishing mark of his choreography. One would think that *Karga Tapas* could not have been choreographed with any other movement vocabulary. The basis of “directional motivation” may be classical ballet but in the hands of Rodrigazo and the bodies of his young dancers, it has successfully been the movement motif of the company’s Asian contemporary/modern dances. The term “Asian contemporary” is what Rodrigazo uses to describe his works which emerge out of the synergy of movements and cultures. He is always reminded of neo-Filipino choreographer Denisa Reyes’s<sup>xvii</sup> works whose movement vocabulary may be very Western but nonetheless deals with Filipino concerns. He remembers a basic question she would ask the dancers and choreographers she would work with: “What are you saying?”

Having taken the question to heart, Rodrigazo always makes it a point to say something by grounding himself and his works in his culture and his realities, avoiding what Zoe Norridge describes as “over-inflated introspection.” He works from the periphery, runs the school at a loss, but remains fired by a faith in the ability of dance, particularly contemporary dance, to find a niche in the culture of Bacolod. In the meantime, the company members survive on the productions and shows they have in Manila, Bacolod not being able to provide the much-needed opportunities to perform in large venues. It may take time for contemporary dance to take root in his hometown but Rodrigazo is undaunted. With the ideals of an artist and the aesthetics of a contemporary dance choreographer, Rodrigazo says he is against the “dumbing of dance.”

Each day is an opportunity for building his repertoire, for strengthening his company in terms of technique and knowledge of contemporary dance. Like a teacher running an academy of dance, he is guided by a syllabus when he trains his company members to master the principles of improvisation<sup>xxiii</sup> such as mirroring, canon, cascading, unison, space/time/movement invention and active/passive weight dependency.

His quarterly trips to Manila to conduct workshops have also become opportunities for him to learn the latest in contemporary dance. Teaching and choreographing are complementary as they allow a dancer to discover new things about himself/herself. This combination, plus his attempts to take his company out of Bacolod once a year is Rodrigazo's formula. The annual productions will provide them with creative spaces that will motivate the dancers to be more stylistically daring and experimental. But is his desire to expose his company to what is happening in the dance world beyond Bacolod rooted in an unstated recognition of the need to be part of the discourse on dance which is generally produced in the center? Perhaps it is. But this is also a way of asserting the presence of the regions whose dance productions and contributions have to be accounted for in the history of dance in the Philippines.

Asked to comment on contemporary dance works created in Manila, he thinks they are "too intellectualized" and adds that he believes that "one dances by heart." This view becomes clearer when one hears Rodrigazo talk about how dancers are like instruments because "music moves through their bodies." Based on this premise, he refuses to impose a regular "count" in some of his contemporary pieces, requiring his dancers to listen and feel the music, telling them that they should "dance as if [they] were the instrument." And it is the pulling technique that

characterizes Dance=Pull's style which makes the bodies more lithe and tensile.

His description of contemporary dance created by choreographers in Manila is telling of how in historicizing contemporary dance, let alone dance in general, it is imperative to consider the subject-position of the artists as this gives us the necessary and appropriate paradigm in analyzing their perception of themselves and their art; critics of dance must analyze how choreographers from the regions re-configure dance genres and paradigms to suit their needs. We must be sensitive to their modes of perception lest we make the mistake of assuming that we are dealing with fixed and static values in dance. In Rodrigazo's case, we see how the term "contemporary" is unmoored from its general use by choreographers in Manila to complement the landscape of Negros. As theatre practitioners Emma Govan, Helen Nicholson, and Katie Normington claim, "performance always unfixes, and the process of devising [performance] also allow for the kind of collective and collaborative action that has the potential to create a renewed sense of belonging in the participants and in audiences" (195).

What Rodrigazo appreciates most as a choreographer is clarity. Having been in the dance scene for decades both as dancer and choreographer, Rodrigazo has seen what has become of modern and contemporary dance and still values the story that a dance tells, in particular: a clear and clean story. It is easy for young contemporary dance choreographers to find excitement in the "latest" trends in dance, to appropriate what is new in the West, and to push the limits of dance or the very idea of dance itself. Corollary to this, it is also easy for them to lose sight of what must be clear in every choreography—an idea, a concept, or a narrative. It has also been convenient for contemporary choreographers to use "contemporary" as an explanation for their works' stylistic failure and amorphous

concepts. What Rodrigazo identifies as “maturity” is thus an important facet of choreography. Although he does not elaborate on this idea, one could glean from his views that this refers to both the mental and emotional ability to create what is elegantly and efficiently simple. One’s style or what he calls “hagod” will eventually surface.

But the realities of dance in Bacolod are far from inspiring. In creating a space for contemporary dance in his region, Rodrigazo has encountered several sources of frustration: the Department of Education (DepEd) which does not seem to have a clear idea of what constitutes a dance workshop for choreographers, dancers, and P.E. Teachers; the teachers’ lack of professionalism; and the National Commission of Culture and the Arts (NCCA) lacking any direction (or even vision) for dance.

The NCCA’s efforts to expose the regions to developments in dance in Manila are likewise ill conceived because the outreach projects in the provinces are not based on a careful assessment of what is happening in the regions. Rodrigazo argues that a huge amount of money is not really needed to enrich the experience of choreographers in the provinces. The NCCA, which complains of not having enough funds, could send choreographers to conduct longer and more comprehensive workshops (i.e., not five-day workshops which are usually what it supports) in the provinces instead of flying in to Manila dancers and choreographers from the regions. It is not only the NCCA that may be faulted for having a cursory understanding of dance. Scholar, critic, dancer, and choreographer Steve Villaruz explains that municipal and provincial “interest in dance could be suspect” because when they commission choreographers to conduct workshops (often just two days) in the guise of introducing to teachers choreographic techniques, it is often “to get ‘authoritative’ input from the national capital region—to mainly serve their

respective street-dancing needs” (140). Rodrigazo is likewise cognizant of this problem, of this careless treatment of dance and lack of appreciation for the art form. It is the weak planning and conceptualizing of institutions that prevent dance from pushing its limits in the provinces. Looking at the problem from a macroperspective, Rodrigazo wishes that there could be a culture of research for teachers of dance, choreographers, and carefully conceived programs in contemporary dance.

Having been in the center and now located at the periphery, Rodrigazo knows that one has to think on a national scale/level. He is aware of the fact that as in most aspects of Philippine life, the cultural agenda of a region is always “coterminous” with a politician’s term, in particular, the Mayor’s. This does not bode well for contemporary dance as it becomes dependent on the graces of a government official. However, there is another problem that needs to be addressed: the audience’s “literacy” or their understanding of contemporary dance. What is contemporary dance without an audience that understands it, anyway? Rodrigazo posits. Thus, the state of contemporary dance has to be assessed and addressed from different angles, all of which are deeply implicated in national realities. An appreciation for this dance form must therefore consider other issues such as state support for culture and the arts, choreographers, and dancers.

And as if the continuous efforts for recognition of contemporary dance choreographers and dancers both in the National Capital Region have not faced enough stumbling blocks, another obstacle was hurled against them two years ago. On February 8, 2011, contemporary dance was hit by another insensitive legislative move—Senate Bill 2679 filed by Senator Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. proposing to make Ballet Philippines (BP) the national ballet company. Citing BP as the oldest dance company in the Philippines, Marcos also stressed that it has “expressed Filipino art and culture for the past 41

years," both here and abroad. For most dancers and choreographers, the bill was an absurdity and a huge setback in the evolution of dance culture in the Philippines; it was hinged on an idea that has been debated upon for decades. As early as 1998, Villaruz had already written about this in "Are National Artistic Companies Necessary?" and, together with independent artists, has always strongly opposed the idea of a national dance company. In a year-end essay on dance, Villaruz points out this issue again because the Marcos bill reminds us of the controversial legislation which made the Bayanihan the national folk dance company:

Personally and politically, I think the idea of charter proclamation harks back from imperial times when royal companies were established to project dynastic hegemonies and bounties. In fact, among Asians we never had that general culture so that we never had that kind of governance and patronage—something Imelda Marcos was accused of. (7)

Although being marginalized in terms of state support and recognition is nothing new to contemporary dance artists, the bill still caught many by surprise considering the critical stance that the world of arts has taken against hegemony, state control, and the right/privilege of certain groups to represent the nation. In the event that BP becomes the Philippine national ballet company, it will not only have a 10-million-peso annual budget, but will likewise enjoy various entitlements such as "(a) free use of theater facilities at the CCP for performances and stage rehearsals up to 40 performances a year... and (c) project grants for research, documentary, new choreography, and/or from the National Commission on Culture and the Arts" (SB 2679). This does not augur well for the dance community, specifically for the contemporary dance community whose members, despite all their disappointments, continue to take pride in their artistic integrity, non-canonical creations, and

alternative ways of reading dance and Philippine realities. These, notwithstanding the chilly attitude toward them by the cultural tastemakers.

With a national ballet company, how then will contemporary dance artists write themselves into the history of dance in the Philippines? Independent contemporary choreographers and dancers in the NCR such as Myra Beltran and dance veterans Felicitas Radaic and Villaruz actively opposed the bill. Even Prof. Felipe de Leon, the head of the NCCA expressed his disappointment. But if we think the bill is a huge setback for artists in the Center, what about choreographers in the regions like Rodrigazo? Twice removed from the Center—as a contemporary dance choreographer whose dance genre continues to push for both audience and institutional recognition and as an artist based in the regions—how will artists like Rodrigazo fit in the narrative of dance in the country? What will their history be like? Will they perpetually be in the fringes of dance history which will most probably focus on national dance companies since the latter officially represent the Philippines? Who will write their history?

But at the heart of the issue is the most contentious concept we have all been contending with: “national.” What does it mean to become a “national dance”, let alone a “national ballet company”? Why do we even have to insist on these terms?

Considering the issues in historicizing dance, there is a need to look at the socio-political and cultural drives that propel independent contemporary artists both in the NCR and in the regions. Dance historiography must present not just alternative narratives but, more importantly, multiple narratives that would account for particular experiences of artists who may all consider themselves “contemporary.” In

one dance forum where Koronadal-based contemporary dance artist Garrovillo delivered a paper, Beltran raised very important questions: How do you wish us contemporary dance artists in the NCR to consider your works? What is “contemporary” for you? The questions are indicative of how contemporary dance artists in the Philippines are positioned differently. Beltran admits that she encounters difficulties in curating contemporary dance creations from the regions. Despite her years of experience in curating dance works, Beltran finds herself walking the tightrope when dealing with works from the regions. Her candor points to an acknowledgement of the need for a deep understanding of the creative energies of performers based in the regions. It sees the different inflections of “contemporary” in the regions.

In the meantime, Rodrigazo will continue to do what he has envisioned himself to do when he decided to go home four years ago: “Teach and create more contemporary pieces that could be distinctly “Dance=Pull.” He will just have to sustain his commitment to dance with a faith that contemporary dance will always be present because “life is movement.” In fact, he already has another project in mind—a piece on “palay” or “azucera.” He hopes that like his *Karga Tapas*, his new creation will further familiarize people with the Bacolod of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Helping out with the Masskara Festival is even on his mind because it has so much potential in terms of providing a space for contemporary dance choreography. The twenty-day festival of drinking, merrymaking, and dancing has an interesting history behind it. Considering Rodrigazo’s deep understanding of Bacolod’s cultural, political, and economic history and the dappled story behind the Masskara Festival, he will be able to integrate the vocabulary of contemporary dance into the current choreographies of street dancing. He sees the synergistic forces of dance movements that could come to play if contemporary dance is given the chance to kinesthetically enrich the fiesta.

He is neither disheartened by institutional failings nor his sister's and brother's recurring comments that his works are simply "giling-giling" or "saot lang ina,"<sup>xxiv</sup> and thus pure entertainment. When he expressed to Locsin his irritation at hearing these snide comments, she humored him by saying: "Ngayon mo lang nalaman yan?" Being in the dance field longer than him, she has learned to accept that dance, let alone contemporary dance, has yet to find more support and serious recognition from the state and a more intelligent audience.

But because Rodrigazo believes that "a country without a culture is a body without a soul," he is positive that contemporary dance will eventually gain popularity and a better understanding in Bacolod. As an independent artist, he is indeed a custodian of dance and celebrates its rich interweaving with the threads of the nation's story.

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## Notes

<sup>xvi</sup> A considerable part of this paper is based on an interview with Dwight Rodrigazo on December 17-18, 2010 in his Dance=Pull Studio, Bacolod City, Philippines.

<sup>xvii</sup> Decades later, the sugarcane fields would give him the material for a well-received piece entitled *Karga Tapas*.

<sup>xviii</sup> Although the definition of contemporary dance in this paper encompasses modern dance techniques, a more strict distinction between modern and contemporary dance would associate the former with choreographers Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Merce Cunningham (active between the 1920s-1940s) and the latter with the developments that came after these pioneers of modern dance. Graham stressed "making visible the interior landscape" (Copeland and Cohen 232). Her technique, based on the solar plexus, is known for "'contraction,' a sharp, quick tightening of the stomach muscles

that shoves back against the spine and ‘release’ or the burst of outward-flowing energy”(Robertson and Hutera 66). Humphrey pointed out that modern dance was “moving from the inside out,” and her technique is based on “the arc between two deaths” where deaths are positions of “stasis” (standing and lying) and every movement is a “recovery from these 2 absolute positions” (Robertson and Hutera 72). Cunningham, a former Graham company member, disputed the reliance on “inner experience and emotional expressivity” – movement, according to him, is “an end in itself” – thereby introducing another development in modern dance (Copeland and Cohen 232). All these techniques were more or less reactions to the constraints of classical ballet.

Contemporary dance, unlike modern dance, had not been codified, and is thus difficult to categorically define. Though it recognizes modern dance choreographers such as Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Dennis, Doris Humphrey, Mary Wigman, Francois Delsarte, Merce Cunningham, Martha Graham, Rudolph von Laban, Loie Fuller, and Jose Limon as the precursors of contemporary dance, it is more of a philosophy than a set of techniques. Contemporary dancers and choreographers in the Philippines agree that the form is more or less fluid, a continuous exploration of movement and its relevance to the dancers and people of the 21st century. Thus, contemporary dance is open to other techniques found in ballet, modern, and postmodern dance.

<sup>xix</sup> Every year, the students are evaluated using the Australian Conservatoire of Ballet (ACB) syllabus which Rodrigazo adheres to. The ACB uses the Russian Vaganova System which is used by many major dance companies, particularly by the entire Soviet choreographic schools.

<sup>xx</sup> In her article “Our Hybrid Tradition,” scholar and dance critic Sally Banes explains that “intercultural performance” has been an old practice. Liberally borrowing from Asian and African ritual, folk, and classical forms of theatre, European and American theatrical dancing has long been hybrid. Ballet for example—from Petipa to Balanchine—has been “multinational in their influences.” And modern choreographers, Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan, and Ruth St. Dennis borrowed from “foreign” traditions. (cited in Norridge )

<sup>xxi</sup> The solid sounds complementing the choreography emerged from the instruments made by the company members. *Karga Tapas* was later

produced by the Filipinas Heritage Library and Ayala Malls, and performed again at the Greenbelt Plaza and Trinoma. Entitled *Pinasadiyaw*—a combination of “mga pananaw, mga sayaw, isang diwa”—the show was envisioned to link Filipinos, regardless of their geographical location and political affiliations, through dance. (Filipinas Heritage)

<sup>xxii</sup> Her first neo-ethnic work staged in New York in the 1990s has inspired Filipino artists both here and abroad.

<sup>xxiii</sup> This, he acknowledges, is a legacy passed on to him by Agnes Locsin.

<sup>xxiv</sup> “That’s [dance] purely gyration” or “That’s only dance.”

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