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Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio: Teacher, Artist, and Humanitarian



I first met Professor Emeritus Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio at the University of the Philippines (UP) Writer's Workshop in 1995 in Baguio of which she happened to be serving as Director. I had just resigned from my job at a multinational institution where I had been working for many years and was the oldest participant among about twenty students from several universities in the Philippines. It was the second of only two workshops that focused on children's literature since the workshops began with the creation of the Creative Writing Center in 1986 by Ma'am Amel, together with National Artist Francisco Arcellana and poet Alejandrino G. Hufana. This particular workshop was special in that Ma'am Amel or MamBo, as she is fondly called by students and colleagues alike, had invited a group of illustrators



Tita Amel and her family.

to illustrate our stories. It also turned out to be her last workshop as director of the Creative Writing Center as she was retiring after thirty-six years of teaching at the University. Retirement, however, couldn't have been further from the truth as Amel was promptly named University Professor Emeritus by the UP Board of Regents and appointed to the Board of Advisers of the present Institute of Creative Writing.

Throughout her professional career, Amel remained a loving wife to Manuel, to whom she has been married for fifty years; a proud mother to only child Amihan and her husband Raymund Ramolete, and doting grandmother to grandchildren Aina Ysabel and J. Rodolfo Manuel. But what ultimately became the cornerstone of Amel's life's work was founding and managing Teatrong Mulat, a children's theatre troupe for which she would write an impressive body of work of children's stories and plays.

What struck me most about Amel was the twinkle in her eye whenever she would look up over her eyeglasses to look at you. One expected magic to happen at any moment. To me, she was the perfect director to conduct a workshop on children's literature. Figuratively and literally, she was Lola Basyang come to life. Amel's grandmotherly mien, in contrast to the intimidating and sometimes humorless demeanors of the panelists, set most of us at ease and allowed for the workshops to proceed without much drama. A year after the 1995 Writer's Workshop, I enrolled in the MA program in Creative Writing in UP and Amel became one of my teachers. Soon after, I was invited to teach and consequently became a fellow at the same Institute of Creative Writing that Amel had founded. At each meeting, I would plant a kiss on Amel's cheek in the same way I would my mother. After all, I considered her to be one of my literary mothers, as did many others.

An additional treat at this workshop was a puppet show staged by no less than Amel's own Teatrong Mulat. Workshop fellows and panelists alike were treated to the puppet play *Ang Paghuhukom*, a humorous but cautionary folktale common to many Asian countries. In the tradition of the *bunraku* puppets of Japan, masked puppeteers dressed in black expertly manipulated the wooden puppets like the silly Monkey King, the largest of the puppets and the small but annoying fly in sight of the audience. Puppet costumes were reminiscent of costumes worn by

Muslim royalty in Mindanao or Malaysia. However, the dialogue was purely in Filipino. For many of us, this was the first time we had seen such a puppet show. While puppetry is not a Filipino art form, it is for most Asian countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Amel had successfully fused Asian puppetry, literature, theatre, and culture into her plays and performances and in so doing created our very own Philippine puppet tradition.

Amel's attraction to the puppet theatre was sparked by an ASPAC Fellowship to observe traditional theatre in Japan in 1973. "There was a big celebration of Monzaemon Chikamatsu's puppet theatre called *bunraku* at the National Theatre in Tokyo," she recalled. "I joined busloads of schoolchildren but was invited to sit in the director's glassed-in third floor booth where I could observe everything, foremost of which was the dancelike movement of the big puppets within the grasp of sometimes as many as three puppeteers whose coordination in moving the puppets was simply amazing. As each of Chikamatsu's old plays unravelled before my astonished eyes, sometimes misty with tears, I fell completely and hopelessly in love with the most elegant puppet theatre in the whole world and I secretly promised myself that I would bring this beautiful theatre to our country for the Filipino children to enjoy." We all know what it means to fall completely and hopelessly in love. And in Amel's case, this was a love that was destined to last.

After the ASPAC Fellowship, Amel applied and received the Ford Foundation Fellowship that allowed her to observe the traditional theatres of Southeast Asia, in particular, the *wayang golek* and *wayang kulit* theatres of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand and the street operas of Singapore. Another fellowship from the Toyota Foundation allowed Amel to attend an international children's theatre festival and observe children's theatre all over the world. As she immersed herself in all these opportunities, she remembers, "I was making plans as a playwright,



Tita Amel has synthesized the rich puppet traditions of Asia.

writing my plays for my own children's theatre."

Amel's first play for children was a full length musical titled *Abadeja, Ang Ating Sinderela*, with music by composer Felipe de Leon Jr. and puppets by Rafael del Casals. Amel herself made the costumes and wigs, her first attempt as a designer. She chose from among the many different influences from Asian puppet theatre to cast and mold her first production and never looked back. For Amel, the Western puppet theatre as exemplified in, for example, *Sesame Street*, was never an option. She could not imagine herself working with rag dolls and soft puppets after all the beautiful Eastern theatre she had observed.

Even as her influences are Asian, there is no mistaking that her plays are quintessentially Filipino. She says, "My stories are gentle and humorously Filipino, the music Filipino, the puppets look Filipino." In fact, Amel invented the basic structure for the Filipino puppet—a triangular body with the traditional soft strings for arms and leg connections. Since *Abadeja*, she has produced dozens of plays, each one

propagating the literature and theatre forms of Asia and Philippines. She has successfully synthesized the myriad and rich puppet traditions of the region towards a form that is contemporary and Asian. With Teatrong Mulat, Amel had found a way to connect us to our Asian neighbors and to her first love – the theatre.

Amel grew up in a prewar Binondo that was bustling and vibrant, where vaudeville stages, opera theatres, and movie houses flourished. Her neighborhood was populated by artists—a painter who was trained by Fabian dela Rosa, a comedian, and a family of musicians who blocked off their street during weekends so they could practice their band playing and baton twirling, providing the neighborhood children with free entertainment. On some afternoons, her mother would close their store early so the family could catch a vaudeville show or a serial movie. Her mother was an avid fan of *zarzuelas*; as a child, she would wait patiently by the door of the old Opera House for couples without children. As soon as one passed by, she would hold on lightly to the lady's *saya* until she was in the theatre and had found a seat. Her father, on the other hand, had a gift for storytelling. He would sit in the center of a mat, with Amel and her siblings on each side of him eagerly awaiting his story for the day. He would begin the storytelling sessions by extending both his arms across his chest and say, "I picked a string, this long," and then he would hug all his children and bring them down with him as he lay down. The first story of the night would then begin. Her father would also bring Amel and her siblings to the open field on Magdalena Street to watch the *senaculo* or the poetical jousts where Amel eagerly lapped up all of the beautiful, florid words and the spectacle of it all. Growing up in such a richly creative milieu, how could Amel not have become anything but an artist? It was in a similar milieu that her child Amihan grew up in and the same one Amel continues to provide for her grandchildren Aina Ysabel and J. Rodolfo

Manuel, who have been training and performing as puppeteers in Teatrong Mulat.

With the breakout of World War II, all schools were closed and the young Amel was free to do as she pleased. She spent her time reading dime novels and the complete plays of William Shakespeare. "I used to spend my time writing the family news on an old rickety typewriter and filling our sidewalk with chalk drawings. When we evacuated to Bulacan, I discovered a rich store of clay inside our L-shaped air raid shelter and started molding heads of people. It was also in Bulacan where a cousin, who owned a dress shop, taught me how to cut and sew. Little did I know that all these were preparations for a life of writing and designing for theatre."

And a life that revolved around the theatre it was. It began with set design. As a student at the Arellano North High School, she designed and executed her first set for the play *The Romancers*. Later, at the University of the Philippines, where she majored in English, she designed sets for small university productions like Virginia Moreno's *Glass Altar* and a fraternity jazz concert. Her big break came when she was tasked to design the sets for the International Dance Festival at the University Theater that would require several set designs and changes for the huge stage. For this work, she was awarded a Fulbright Smith Mundt scholarship to the University of Wisconsin in Madison in 1956, where she enrolled in an MA in Theater Arts. At the University of Wisconsin, Amel was introduced and exposed to a larger world of art and theatre that provided inspiration for her very first two plays—*Sepang Loca* written in 1957 and *Rooms* in 1958 which were subsequently published in the US. Both plays won prize money and more importantly, were premiered at the UW Play Circle. She was additionally commissioned to design the sets for *Sepang Loca*. It was, she recalls, "an unbelievable beginning of my new life in theatre and I have not slackened my pace

in my work as a playwright-designer especially when I discovered children's theatre."

Children's theatre is unique in that, according to Amel, "it is a gloriously, happy stage. One who hopes to work in children's theatre must remember that the child must be taught about love and joy, about life and continuity, otherwise, you can just go up there and tell them life is drab and worth nothing at all like what writers of horror and murder films and theatre are doing. As a playwright for children, you must be a painter with a palette of bright colors or a composer with music sheets of happy notes." Amel's puppet troupe has traveled the world, showcasing—not only Philippine—but Asian culture as well. But it is not only culture that her puppets bring but also healing and renewal.

That "glorious, happy stage" has been setup in many different and unlikely venues—auditoriums, classrooms, libraries, plazas—any place where Teatrong Mulat could set up a stage and children were present. But the most noteworthy of all were the thirty sites around the area affected by the explosion of Mt. Pinatubo that covered several provinces in ash and lahar and forced the evacuation of thousands of people including Aetas to evacuation centers. Amel's puppets cheered displaced children and brought hope to thousands in the areas affected by the eruption. According to Amel, "The Mt. Pinatubo experience is the summit of Teatrong Mulat's theatre performances not only because of its extent and expanse but because it tried to reach thousands of children who refused to talk and laugh after the awful, traumatic experience of dark days and nights during and after the eruption." Upon the request of a fellow puppeteer, Malou Patalijug from the UP College of Medicine, acting upon a request from the Department of Psychiatry to bring the puppets to "break the trauma," Amel's determined band of puppeteers drove through damaged roads in their sturdy and dependable Mulat Urvan. They waded in shallow rivers under broken bridges and slept

in partially destroyed hospitals. They were guided by eager and helpful doctors to the “white ash-covered ground” which became their stage. Amel recalls, “Children came in the hundreds, sat in front of our stage and gradually, as the puppeteers moved the puppets and I told the story, what we were praying for came true—the children were talking and laughing! After the performances, some told us about their frightening experiences. As we drove away from each site, the children ran after us shouting, “Come back again, please!” This is truly a demonstration of the power of storytelling to transform and to bring the audience to an awareness. Her puppet troupe is after all called Teatrang Mulat and according to Amel, “Our mission was to open the eyes of children to many things, art and culture of Asia.”

Amel is also, without a doubt, the fairy godmother of modern Philippine children’s literature. It was through her foresight, persistence, and insistence that this type of literature was first offered as a subject in both the undergraduate and graduate levels at the University of the Philippines, the only university in the Philippines to do so, thus allowing a new breed of writers for children to be nurtured and discovered. Amel says, “I considered it a necessity if we are to develop our book publication industry, which logically should begin with children’s books. All I wanted was to attract young writers who wrote in English and Filipino and who were willing to devote their talent and time to writing for children.”

Amel’s work and passion for the puppet theatre has been recognized both here and abroad. Dr. Krishen Jit, professor, director, and theater critic from the University of Malay in Malaysia has dubbed her the Grande Dame of Southeast Asian Children’s Theatre and has this to say of Amel: “She is one of the few Southeast Asian theatre practitioners who has transcended what I would call the age syndrome. Professor Bonifacio has never laid down her burden in theatre, and she must



therefore be viewed as a shining example of a completely committed theatre person dedicated to excellence and innovation.” UP Professor Emeritus of Drama and director Tony Mabesa adds: “Awesome is her passion, dedication, energy and creativity in the realm of puppet theatre. In the ephemeral world of the theatre—we are blessed to have in our midst . . . this dazzling artist of the theatre.” I have been personally blessed to be able to consider Ma’am Amel as one of my mentors. With this essay, I pay tribute to a great teacher and artist. Bravo, Ma’am Amel, Bravo!