

## THEATER PLAY

**The Poetics of Encounter in Ma. Cecilia dela Rosa's *Labor Room***

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Just when an impending tragedy is about to hold plot and place at the center, steadily and theoretically charged with the dialogue of encounter, the rule of dramatic gesture hinged upon a happening, a gathering of lives—that is, pictured positive—to be precise, Ma. Cecilia “Maki” dela Rosa’s *Labor Room* narrates an experience so close to home that the characters themselves are like the sketches of everyday reality. They are all pursued by, even if not pursuing, the hope handsomely buried in the womb, or inside a room, never realizing that giving birth to *it* is but a contingent and continuous struggle in the wake of loss. The narrative secures both the struggle of the characters and the form of the play to achieve a normal ordering, a closure—from the lead roles’ consequential meeting to the emanating pressure or instruction radiating against the hospital walls. It as if fate orchestrated Veh, Ate, and Nay to face the faceless audience of their past, regretting, to finally come full circle, though resolving issues in a busy setting and with abrupt speech could lead into something plastic: a feeling arrested by indecision.

There is a mistakenly blank gesture in the way very current situations take umbrage at how characters on stage carry their roles so easily, unwittinglywhelmed by the sacred medium of the script, such that the given role has had to put them under duress only to make them experience the character. This practice, through logical movements and careful timing, may comprise the theatrical framing of sense-action in what’s totally tragic and comic in all of situations accounting for directness or, in the case of plural positionalities, encounter. This said, I would like to focus on the many shades of encounter in *Labor Room*, their pressure on gestures contemplated as a grotesque exuberance of time and place. First is the temporal setting, the hospital, which is the space of encounter detailing the gesture of pain, impropriety, loss, and everything that makes the lead characters persevere from start to end. Why is this assertion of gesture, that for me is ‘untheatrical’ or realistic, begetting intention? Veh, for instance, is technically the agent of performance; further, she reconciles the process of incorporating and being incorporated into the Filipino

tradition of seeking friendship with and among strangers, thus imbibing the unbelievable reality of family relations. Intention to have a safe delivery in some respect ironically obscures her desire for friendship, since her difficult labor despite its mechanical treatment under the expert watch of the doctor, who in the play is a consistent terror, aspires to become an individualistic performance. Furthermore, Veh is a text subjected into a performative task of bearing multiple meanings and dire speculations confronting her or possibly her child's future.

Secondly, at the core of the play's presentation of the pressing context about the plight of Filipino mothers, the audience somehow solicits empathy from or identification with the actors. But the Brechtian stylistic tics of directors Jose Estrella and Issa Lopez predominate the scriptorial assignment from which the actors painstakingly wrest. One good look at Ate's character speaks so much of the Filipino trait of being inquisitive enough to remind audience members of the 'fellow-feeling' inherent in them, regardless how they accede to the demands of conscience-raising evoked at the outset by the intruding Doc Jean (at times her nurse), to whom all pregnant characters run especially during critical moments when the dialectic of exchange is blurred. For this operation, I believe in the play's symbolic potency: the dimming lights in the operating room, the overlapping dialogue, the lead roles' overriding trialectic tension, the diegetic emergency calls and voice-over, the utility staff doing her rounds. All these potentially destroy the relation between difference and distance, what they usually send to memory and to actors' attention is a plurivocal language that no longer attracts sympathy. When I say 'attention,' I am deriving it from the objective identification of the actors from without. The utility staff, nurse, and the attending doctor suggest that the play will not evolve into a play without, after the apparent character contradictions between Doc Jean and the pregnant mothers, the spectators' withdrawal from such an experience of secondness exposed to them by the theatre. Therefore, the pressure on dialogue achieved at the very climax creates a texturally tension-ready setup, with the actors musing about their confused state, their strange imperiality, as it were, the poetics of encounter.

Let me underscore in brief the spectatorial encounter that meets the audience at the most accessible of places—remaining fixed, this shared space we call the stage. The set design of *Labor Room* at CCP's Tanghalang Aurelio Tolentino leaves in exponentially indiscriminate vision a speculative display of what Filipino tradition partakes of as gossip, the spectacle of *tsismis* conflating truth with emergency. I like the character of Ate neutralizing the tension bothering Veh as a young mother, as well as her being blunt about Nay's lamentable experience of marriage; furthermore, the trialectic established among them in the busy labor room is but a critical manifestation of the impurities of human nature about to

put to test, again and again, their tried patience. Driven by the desire to move the plot forward, through the characters' perfunctory resolve (Doc Jean included), as well as the fluctuating tempo alternating between duty and decision, performance and performativity, the spectatorial encounter that engages the audience of *Labor Room* sets forth a new emotional expressivity that is consciously objective in a Brechtian sense; hence, transplanting audience members' sight of the labor room with a more claustrophobic vision that spatially contracts, as it were, the dispersed location of the beds so that the actors can ably move around while speaking out their dilemmas. This theatrical gesture of action and space, no matter how different they represent each other, can textually point us to that game-like idea we suppose to be quintessentially dramatic.

Once more, the spectatorial encounter present in and alien from *Labor Room* deserves a little bit of retreat. From actors doing away with identification issues to the violence of "we" in almost visible signs projected by and through the authoritative "I", some permutations to make characterization produce more sites of "we"—a *weness* that empower actors and audience, but in fact excluded them *from* the story-reality trajectory—wear off in stages as what we can deduce from Doc Jean's treatment of her patients. She reaches out to them from time to time, but this show of kindness is preternatural and only duty-bound. Consequently, the staging of Doc Jean's character requires a slew of intention rather than attention, and not only do we care less, or worse, loathe her character as truly villainous, we also are tempted to believe, as that which appears to our mind, that she could amplify her resolute "I" into an indubitably supercilious "we." Here attention and intention do not practically converge because the former is more politicized, if not superimposed onto the qualities of the *auter*, the other only political. In other words, the identification of the spectators with the actors is no big deal at all; such identification is inevitable. But if the identification consumes rational predisposition, such indeterminacy and dissonance in character development will prevail. Critic Helene Cixous "links identification to violation" (Cixous qtd. in Diamond 391). *Labor Room*, however, closes off leaving the audience speculating on their own, rather than being incorporated radically.

### **Some Permutations**

The disputed poetics of encounter in *Labor Room* would be better if all three actors are left on stage without a singular focus upon a character hitting the end of the play. Veh being a future mother in what must have been a contextually realistic portrayal, or her being the play's play or carrier of theatrical possibilities viewed

from the beginning as a performance text, could be interpreted by rote if she incorporated her role as one of an implicit problematique, rather than the audience singling her out from the corner with her spotlight—though intuitively foreign—*agon*. I push for some critical permutations to make the play's ending somehow elude the persuasiveness of Greek tragedy. With remarks seemingly uncommon to repeating stage rehearsals, *Labor Room* should end up re-siting the image of Veh back in the ensemble of hopeful mothers. This is the scene that favors the pessimistic stance of community; such immense belonging going as far back as the adage that the Filipino family that prays together (in another sense, 'talking') will stay together.

Another permutation: the labor room. The play's setting "where the eye's photographic registration of objects yields to the mind's effort to pierce surface, to interrogate appearances (Brooks 2)," often attenuates the misconception people attach to the hospital, specifically in a place like the labor room, that it is a place of uncontained risk were it not for the seething dread in the heart of the sick. Actors bearing in their womb either life or chance, fortune or fiasco, are in the long run a representation of the play's unfinished narrative on the one hand, and of reality's contestable design to frame human existence on the other. In short, *Labor Room*, staged as part of the celebration of Virgin Labfest 14, sidesteps to be labeled as a moralistic play. Rather, the Brechtian and expressionistic elements fuse together to make the characters prove the existence of play or chance encounter, "though put into question, masked by villainy and perversions of judgment" (20). The long wait in the hospital testifies to the closure the characters search for in life, in such a way as extended dialogue develops tension and not a lull, and forces itself upon the audience members, making themselves know themselves knowing it.

The art of attention is taken into consideration, say, from the smallest detail to the form preceding emotion. When I say 'preceding,' style is apparently dominating the context or deliberate character identification. Tension could be better experienced if the actors turned emotional response—that is, reciprocally and as need be—into praise received from the audience. I call this something of a 'praise' theory in order to dispense rewards from and out of plaudits. Actors can pour enough attention on the prize or the end goal of distancing themselves from deliberate identification, which merely reminds us to violate the plurivocal *weness* in theatre pointed out by Elin Diamond (2007) citing Cixous in her later essays. Better yet, the alienation or A-effect in *Labor Room* could be rendered with panache both on stage and to memory if praise, as a theatrical discourse and medium, penetrates the consciousness of local theatre.

## Works Cited

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Diamond, Elin. 'The Violence of "We": Politicizing Identification'. *Critical Theory and Performance*. Revised Edition. Ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2007. 403–12.

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