

The “Comic Be-Subject” in Juan Ekis’s *Ensayo*, or Reality as

Performance Text

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It would be easy to suffuse a performance text like Juan Ekis’s *Ensayo* (2018) with a critical language-game of inside/outside and centripetal/centrifugal, given the scope of the material and the weathered flair of the actors taking over the play. Staged at the Cultural Center of the Philippines’ Tanghalang Aurelio Tolentino as part of the Virgin Labfest 14 spectacle, *Ensayo* highlights the meta-condition of a performance at the expense of the plastic theater almost always engaging actors to sashay to and fro on a stage, be it a stage of physical and psychical structuring, thereby rethinking rehearsals as a play in their own right. The consciousness of the script is mapped out in the presence of veteran stage actors like Bembol Roco and Sherry Lara, who played Peds and Tisha respectively, two acting aspirants locked up in a life-changing scene they would never forget.

Already in their sixties, Peds and Tisha view the acting class, in which they currently rehearse different roles, as both a “home” for their pent-up artistic meanderings, and, upon realizing such an awkward situation surging in their wake, a “cul-de-sac.” It could be premised on the fact that the two lead roles are confined in their own touted beliefs taking shape only in the classroom: a home built for strange recollections. As the estrangement from the given script grows too decrepit and peculiar, the actors begin to malingering truth by working on the (kissing) scene—that is to say, the text romanticized repeatedly—without them knowing that they are in for a little more than just a rehearsal.

The comedy of parts, gasping for air of intricate unknowing: there is an awareness of the *uncomic*, if rarely upending the non-comic, in situations like familiar setups, unpredictable encounters, or a meta-condition like Peds and Tisha’s revival of old romance from script to reality. It might be helpful to conduct an outright research on the importance of the comic in order to confront the staged and the real, hence

the actors embracing distance in such a way that the play makes them resist closure. Ekis in effect takes the initiative in studying the appearance of theatre as a reality compounded of the comic and the tragic. Aligning the rehearsal to its moment of play, *Ensayo* has placed the actors in an unwitting yet confused stage of comic reenactments. In the words of Julian Beck, the desire is “to make a play which would no longer be an enactment but the act itself” (Schechner 25). The actors are presumed to turn the classroom or rehearsal room into an event in which they would always be experiencing the play of encounter not anew at all but something else each time. The very act of analysis is undermined in the play’s concentrated meta-narrative.¹ Not only do the actors see themselves crossing the script beyond its borders, but they are also lost in the process of putting together like-minded souls in the familiar frame they know outright from the start: love. Further, gestures of comic relief, from old-school jokes, slips of the tongue, to strange attraction are made more interesting through the actors’ utter ineptness in rehearsing the kissing scene. This show of innocence adapts to their detailed treatment of the script and to the setting where they stayed for hours killing time and, interestingly enough, the subject they are studying with passion and panache. I credit Ekis for taking the extra mile to ascertain the deep structurality of the meta-narrative, foregrounding stage design and the comic situatedness of the actors. Working together with the brilliant director, Eric Villanueva dela Cruz, the dedicated Ekis worked hard to conjure the detailed scenic indications of *Ensayo* which he himself added to the text of his play in order for the audience to recognize the texture of the stage polished with school memories. Therefore, both the script and the stage stand aground to define the comic.

Meanwhile, the use of language in the play adheres to the shifting of character roles, which oscillates between the staged portrayal and the comic experience of the actors while feeding themselves into the script and out, only to realize that they are rehearsing an already thwarted performance. Laughter is a relatively unexplored archipelago. Only when we appreciate its archipelagic and tectonic context can we be sated then with a promise: to kill the subject and *be* the subject. The “comic be-subject,” in my opinion, requires a happening that can be (re)placed; in this sense Peds and Tisha no more deride the subject of the script but themselves, that is, as the comic be-subject getting ready to be radically incorporated in yet another cosmos: again, love. What they perform to perfect something deserves attention since they are now rehearsing life. Indeed, they are the legitimate flowers of ridicule, but of the most critical bunch.

At this point I will have to disclose my critique of the comic in *Ensayo*—its position in the staging of the play and its constructed positionality. I see Ekis’s script hugging

the potential of a meta-discourse because of the obvious ramifications it sets out to confront. The play, to be exact, is a play within a play that deserves creative exploration though lacks critical interest simply because the subject is not there. The comic subject, like the roles Peds and Tisha examine, is physically not there. Nor is it aurally present like the binary conflating "the present absent" with "the absent present." Literally, when the meta-narrative concludes that its comic subject is not there, it then becomes indisputable as far as critical thinking is concerned. The comic subject being not there on stage or upon any theatrical platform basically means it is different from "being absent" or "metaphysically present." The placelessness of the comic subject is but therefore a performance that textualizes not only the stage in general but also the world we live in.

I would prefer, however, to suggest one further direction, one that we can glean from Ekis's comic subjects constantly shifting directorial roles that eventually lean toward a conflicting bias. This kind of constructed positionality of comic actors, I would say, constitutes an agency that would attract closure that is sought by actors at the end of the play. The agency is definitely one of binary opposition that strengthens structure. I offer a direction, simply put: "kill the subject and be the subject." The "be" here is no longer contestable since one can replace or become the subject right away. To add further, I push for the newness of character such as the comic be-subject. Consequently, the actors of *Ensayo* become the comic be-subjects who do not hinge on the playwright's script for direction. Nor do they perform the text to get real in a realistic world. One thing: actors [we] live to see reality as [performance] text.

NOTE

- 1 Comedy through the ages has aroused rather less theoretical interest than tragedy, "partly because of comedy's supposedly inferior literary standing and partly because the very act of analysis is always in danger of killing its subject" (Bergson 25).

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