

Palasyo ni Valentin: Radical Transformation of the Sarswela

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In 1998, as part of the celebration of the Centennial of Philippine Independence, the Philippine Centennial Commission (PCC) sponsored the Centennial Literary Prize. This literary contest gave the heftiest cash prizes to winners in three language divisions: Filipino, English and Spanish. The Filipino division gave out prizes in the categories of the *sarswela*, the essay, epic poetry, the novel and the screenplay.

In the *sarswela* category, the first prize of P1,000,000 went to *Palasyo ni Valentin* (The Palace of Valentin) by Mario O'Hara, while the second prize of P750,000 was divided between *Paglayang Minamahal* (Cherished Freedom) by George de Jesus III, *Hibik at Himagsik nina Victoria Laktaw Atbp.* (The Complaint and Rebellion of Victoria Laktaw and Others) by Bienvenido Lumbera and *Bayan, Isang Paa na Lamang* (My Country, Just One Pore Step) by Melba Padilla Magay (see *Tatlong Sarsuwela 2003*).

Palasyo ni Valentin was first staged in chamber version by Antonio Mabesa at the U.P. Faculty Center in Diliman in 1999. A full production of *Palasyo* was mounted by the Philippine Educational Theatre Association under the direction of Soxy Topacio at the then newly-opened PETA Theatre Center in Quezon City in 2005. All the other plays were staged in 1999-2002. All four winners, including *Palasyo*, were published by the PCC and the University of the Philippines Press in 2003.

No doubt the idea of using the *sarswela* form as a vehicle for the nationalist themes was inspired by the success of the productions of *Walang Sugat* by Severino Reyes in the last three decades. The most famous and earliest of the full-length *sarswela* written by "The Father of the Tagalog *Sarswela*," *Walang Sugat* (1902) is set in the period of the 1896 Revolution against Spain. Forgotten for many years, it was first revived successfully under the direction of Daisy Hontiveros-Avellana in 1970, a period of intense nationalism and activism. Its phenomenal success was due in part to its inclusion of the song "Bayan Ko" (1928), later to become the anthem of protest against the Marcos dictatorship. Since then, *Walang Sugat* has enjoyed several re-stagings, the most recent of which were done by Tanghalang Pilipino, resident theater company of the Cultural Center