

THE PHILIPPINE KOMEDYA: HISTORY, INDIGENIZATION, REVITALIZATION

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The *komedya*, the oldest genre of formal theatre in the Philippines, deserves to be studied by scholars and revitalized by theatre artists as an essential component of the Filipino national theatre. This essay introduces the *komedya*, by giving a short overview of its history, script and production and by discussing two important issues regarding the form: (a) its indigenization, or the process by which it became Filipino; and (b) its revitalization, or the ways by which the *komedya* was transformed in the past and is being transformed in the present.

The *komedya* may be defined as a play in verse in three or more parts, with a convention of marches, stylized movements and delivery of verses, and choreographed battles. The usual subject of the *komedya* are the lives of saints (usually the patron saint of the town in whose honor the *komedya* is being staged) or, more commonly, the strife between Christians and Moors, set in European and Middle Eastern kingdoms in the middle ages. “*Komedya*” or “*comedia*” is its most common name among the eight major linguistic groups, but in some regions it may also be known as “*moro-moro*” because of the recurrent theme of Muslim-Christian conflict.

History

The Philippine komedya is a descendant of the *comedia* fathered by Spanish playwright Lope de Vega in the sixteenth century. From its Spanish ancestor, the komedya inherited the different types of subject matter, which could be drawn from either contemporary events (*comedia de capa y espada*) or the lives of saints (*comedia de santo*) or the stories of far-away kingdoms (*comedia a fantasia*). The local version also inherited: a) the form of the original play which is in verse and in three parts, with a convoluted and sensational plot, idealized characters and the themes of religion, love and honor; (b) the practice of including a poem called *loa* at the beginning and inserting comic skits called *entremeses* and *sainetes* between long acts of the *comedia*; and (c) the convention of using costumes which tended to be ahistorical and the use of a stage with one permanent set of two levels, with a balcony on the second level and two main exits/ entrances on the lower level (Tiongson 1982, 1-5).

In the Philippines, the very first *comedia*, written by the Jesuit Vicente Puche in romance and Latin, was presented by the students of the Jesuits in the cathedral of Cebu on the occasion of the visit of Bishop Pedro de Agurto in 1598 (Retana 1909, 19-20). In the seventeenth century, when Spain was trying to establish its foothold in the different islands, the *comedia de santo* was used to Christianize the natives, as in the play *Martirio de Santa Barbara*, which was presented in 1609 by the Boholanos in their own language. It is said that when the native audience saw Santa Barbara ascending to heaven and her persecutors burning in hell, they promptly threw their anito images and amulets into a bonfire for fear that they would also suffer the fires of hell (ibid., 22-23).

Most of the plays performed in the seventeenth century were about saints, except for one entitled *Gran comedia de la toma del pueblo de Corralat y conquista del cerro* (1637), which dramatized a real event: the taking of the fort of Sultan Kudarat by Sebastian Hurtado de Corcuera in that same year (Lopez 1973, 340).

By the eighteenth century, more and more secular komedya were being staged and by 1766, the komedya about the lives and loves of European royalty and their battles with the Moros of the Middle East had appeared. Most prominent of the authors of such komedya was the poet Jose de la Cruz or Huseng Sisiw (1746-1829) of the famous Teatro de Tondo. He was supposed to have been so adept at the komedya that he could create a komedya script from an *awit* (metrical romance) overnight and stage a full production of it next day. Among the komedya attributed to him are *Principe Baldovino*, *Doce Pares de Francia*, *Don Gonzalo de Cordoba* and *Jason y Medea* (Rivera 1933, 47).

By Huseng Sisiw's time, certain conventions of the Tagalog komedya had been established: (1) the use of the metrical romances as sources of komedya stories (Retana 1909, 44); (2) the participation of two important characters in all stories, namely: the prince who fights moors, highway men, lions and tigers and always comes out victorious (usually because of a miracle), and the *pusong* or jester who makes the people laugh through his antics and his comments on local issues and personalities and on the komedya itself (Zuñiga 1973, 80-82); and (3) the use of two verse forms: the *plosa* or dodecasyllabic quatrain (which is the verse form of the *awit*) and the *romance/hakira* or the octosyllabic quatrain (the verse form of the *korido*) (Tiongson 1982, 21-22).

By the nineteenth century, the komedya had blossomed into the most popular play in the theatres of Manila for three reasons. First, with the opening of the Manila to world trade in 1834 and the subsequent rise of business enterprises which attracted salaried workers to the city, there was a demand for the kind of entertainment that the komedya could provide. Second, in the provinces, a new class of landlords grown rich from the export of agricultural products (tobacco, coffee, abaca, sugar, indigo among others) assumed sponsorship of many town projects, including the komedya. Lastly, with strict censorship implemented by the colonial government, the komedya was the only theatre form that

was considered “safe” by the authorities, since its subject matter was drawn from romances about far-away kingdoms and its messages always favored Christians over Moors and Europeans over non-Europeans.

Aside from the Teatro de Tondo (1820-1890), thirteen more theatres staged regular komedya shows in Manila’s *arrabales* with professional troupes (Buenaventura 1994, 189-192). These troupes were also invited to perform the komedya in the towns of Tagalog provinces like Bulacan, Bataan, Morong, Laguna, Batangas and Cavite, thereby inspiring the formation of local troupes in these provinces (Tiongson 1982, 35).

In no time, the komedya began to appear in the non-Tagalog regions. *Gonzalo de Cordoba* by Anselmo Fajardo was performed for seven days in Bacolor in 1831. In Bicol *Don Alejandro y Don Luis* by Guillermo Manlangit was staged in 1860. In Cebu Ceferino Regis and Salvador Gantuangco collaborated on *Alimpatar* in 1876. In Iloilo, Eriberto Gumban’s *Carmelina* introduced the komedya in 1889. In Antique, *Principe Gimeno* was staged in 1893. From the late 1800s, komedya was performed in the Ilocos (Manlapaz 1981, 14-15; Realubit 1976, 23; Mojares 1981, 231; Gonzaga 1917, 70-71; Fernandez 1978, 22-24; Hufana 1963, xvii; de los Reyes 1904, 20).

With its rise to popularity, the komedya was standardized in terms of script and performance. With the publication of hitherto orally-transmitted metrical romances in *librito* format, the komedya writers and producers now had easier access to what would turn out to be the main sources of the play in the 19th and 20th centuries. As in the original ballads, the romantic plot between royal characters as well as the conflict between Islam and Christianity became dominant themes in the komedya. By this time too, the conventions of a sing-song delivery of verse (*punto*), the vocabulary of gestures and movements (*mustra*) as well as the *marchas* (*marcha cristiana*, *pasadoble*) and batallas in dance (also called *moro-moro*) to accompaniment of band music, and the convention of costuming Christians in black and Moors in red were codified. Miracles, monsters and magical artifices made the komedya even more spectacular, and sellable.

But even as the komedya was delighting audiences with its spectacles, one komedya writer, Francisco Baltazar, sought to elevate the play to a higher level of artistry. Realizing perhaps how divisive the Moro-Cristiano theme was, Baltazar set aside this type of conflict, and instead (a) chose narratives based on historical events or (b) focused on internal rather than merely external contradictions. In *Mahomet at Constanza* (ca. 1857), Baltazar used the plight of the Greeks under their foreign overlords the Turks around 1828 as a parallel to the situation of the Philippines under the Spanish colonizers (Sevilla 1997, 516-519). On the other hand, in *Orosman at Zafira*, Baltazar developed the conflict within and between characters: in Zafira between her love for Orosman and her devotion to her father Sultan Mohamud who was murdered on the orders of Orosman's father Boulasem; in Orosman, between his love for Zafira and his loyalty to his father as well as his brother Abdalap; in Abdalap, between his desire for Zafira and his loyalty to his father Boulasem and his brother Orosman, and so on. Where the battles in most komedya are caused by an external force (namely religion), here the confrontations naturally and logically result from the deep emotions overflowing in each character. In Baltazar, the komedya transforms from an epic of spectacular strife to a drama of characters, with a unified, if often complicated, plot and verse that drives the narrative forward or builds a character or makes us feel the emotion of a character through fresh and deftly crafted imagery.

But Baltazar's efforts were not enough to transform the komedya, which by the end of the nineteenth century had become so unwieldy and pompous they were described by Juan Atayde as "dramones Tagalos" (Atayde 1892, 306-307). As expected, the komedya then became the target of attack, not once but twice, at the turn of the century. From 1878 to about 1887, Tagalog and Spanish writers, who had formal education in the arts and sciences and had been exposed to literature and theatre which were more realistic in content and form, launched several diatribes against the "ignorant" komedya.

In his *Viajes*, Juan Alvarez Guerra documented the komedya production in Albay in the 1870s and noted its addiction to fantasy

(Alvarez Guerra 1887, 167-168). Francisco de Paula Entrala wrote and staged a sainete, *Cuadros Filipinos* (1882), which satirized the komedya, showing how illogical, ridiculous and unreal the world of the komedya was (Entrala 1882, 52-54). Around 1887, Lorenzo D'Ayot exposed the "ignorance" of the komedya, saying:

to the Indio geography is a myth. The characters of his dramas... go from Denmark or Sweden to Manila – all of them covering the distance with astonishing rapidity. The anachronisms in his dramas are terrible. They bring face to face Charlemagne and Moses, Alexander the Great and Bayard. In his dramas bands of Igorots mingle with soldiers of the Middle Ages and mestizos with ladies dressed in the style of the last century. (Lopez Jaena 1974, 133-134)

Lastly, Rizal himself critiques the komedya through the words of the young man in the meeting in the town hall in *Noli Me Tangere*:

What will we get from the week of komedya proposed by the teniente mayor? What can we learn from the kings of Bohemia and Granada, who order their daughters to be beheaded or load them into a cannon which is later converted into a throne? We are neither kings nor barbarians, nor do we have cannons; and if we imitated them we would be hanged in Bagumbayan... (Rizal 1996, 119)

But worse was still to come. From 1902 to 1920, the komedya was viciously attacked, this time by Filipino writers from different regions who were not only educated and exposed to the literature of realism but who were convinced that Filipinos were now capable of producing theatre about real life, especially since the censorship under Spain was no more. The most severe attack came from Severino Reyes who wrote *R.I.P.* in 1902 to ridicule the komedya and show how those who strut around like royalty on stage cannot even pay for their rent in real life (Reyes 1987, 497-542).

In 1902, Vicente Sotto satirized the komedya, which he called *linambay*, because actors performing sword fights looked like crabs (*lambay*) except that these crabs did not pinch or bite. He made fun of the fantastic stories of princes and princesses who fought lions and tigers, and birds who sang like humans. He blamed the komedya for propagating ignorance among the people (Navarra 1975, 30; Mojares 1975, 33; Ramas 1982, 1). In 1908, Mena Pecson Crisologo staged his sarsuwela *Codigo Municipal* in Vigan, where he equated the komedya with the old autocratic form of government under Spain and the sarsuwela with the new order under America that “respected freedom of speech and of conscience.” In the end, the sarsuwela and “democracy” are simultaneously endorsed (Hufana 1963, 189-204). In 1915, Felix Galura published *Ing Cabiguan* which aimed to expose the ignorance propagated by the *kuriru* and *komedya*. He contended that only arrogance and immorality were taught by these forms to their audiences so it is “time to burn these fabrications and throw them into the river, using our language as soil to bury them under” (Manlapaz 1981, 16-18). In 1917, Galansiyang in *Makinaugalingon* made fun of the “moro moro” where Moros and Cristianos were dressed like Philippine Scouts and Constabulary soldiers, where a seven-year-old prince wooed a ten-year-old princess. The only magic in the moro moro, he said, was in how it devoured the money that should have been used to buy rice in the first place (Fernandez 1978, 24-25).

With the resounding success of Severino Reyes’ *Walang Sugat* in Manila, the sarsuwela banished the komedya from the theatres of Manila forever. But the form continued to flourish in many regions until the outbreak of World War II because (a) provincial landlords continued to sponsor the komedya during fiestas, and (b) the people themselves, who had not yet been Americanized by the new schools, continued to live in the Hispanic culture of the previous century. In fact, the komedya spread to other regions with the migration of Ilocanos and Cebuanos to other parts of the country.

Still deriving stories from published metrical romances or weaving narratives patterned after these romances, the komedya

of the first half of the twentieth century followed the conventions of komedya productions of the turn of the century. With the spread of the electronic media of radio and film, the komedya accommodated themes, plots and characters, as well as costumes, music, and other aspects of performance from the new media. For example, movies like *The Bridge of Sighs* were adapted to komedya form; the pasadoble carried melodies made popular by radio and film (“O Maliwanag na Buwan,” “Roll Out the Barrel”); American fashions seen in Hollywood films were paraded by princesses in the komedya; and action film techniques of fencing, jumping off parapets and rolling on the ground found their way into batalla scenes of the komedya.

On the other hand, the komedya itself invaded radio, in radio serials like *Prinsipe Amante* and *Lola Basyang*, as well as film, in costume pictures like *Prinsipe Teñoso*, *Ibong Adarna*, *Siete Infantes de Lara*, *Rodrigo de Villa*, as well as in komedya-inspired movies, like *Apat na Alas*, *Prinsesa at Pulubi*, and *Prinsipe Amante sa Rubitanya*. Even contemporary action films reveal komedya elements in the preoccupation with long fighting sequences, in the idealization of the hero as kind-hearted but fearless in battle and the heroine as sweet, shy and modest.

With the decline of the feudal order and the weakening of the economy, the komedya began to lose its traditional sponsors in the provinces, namely, the land-owning families. At the same time, with the rise of a more scientific education and the spread all over the country of radio, film and television which provided new and riveting shows, audiences began to abandon the komedya in the different regions.

Today, the komedya seems to survive only in a few towns in provinces like Nueva Ecija, Rizal, Laguna, Quezon, Ilocos Sur, Iloilo and Palawan. Here they are still presented during town fiestas or special occasions, with sponsorship from government (e.g. Department of Tourism), non-government corporations (e.g. San Miguel), OFWs (as in San Dionisio, Parañaque) or cultural institutions (e.g. Cultural Center of the Philippines, CCP).

The rise of nationalism in the 1970s led to a new appreciation of indigenous culture and the desire among many cultural workers to make the komedya a part of the national theatre of the country. As a result, the komedya was studied by scholars and revived by artists of the legitimate theatre, who have tried to raise it to a higher level of artistry as befits a pillar of the Filipino national theatre.

The Script and Production

The script of a komedya is called *orihinal*, and is always written in verse, the two most common being the dodecasyllabic quatrain or plosa and the octosyllabic quatrain called the romance.

Following is a quatrain in plosa from *Orosman at Zafira* (Medina 1990, 63). Here Zafira prays that she may not fall in love with Orosman:

Zafira: Alang darakila, awa mo'y ilawit!
Natukso nang lubos ang tibay ng dibdib.
Susian mo yaring pusong nahahapis
Nang di magpatuloy masok ang pag-ibig.

(Great Allah, your mercy to me extend
My firm resolve has been sorely tested.
Keep my grieving heart under lock and key
So that love may not enter so freely.)
(Translation mine.)

As the long lines of the plosa lend themselves to the expression of grand emotion, so the shorter lines of the *hakira* or *romance* are suitable for the staccato quips of comedy. Here are the lines of the pusong Nubio from the same komedya (Medina 1990, 97):

Nubio: Ay, ano, aagwanta ka
Hanggang tanghaling padipa
Na taas ang isang paa
Parang lalapaing baka?

(So are you going to take it,
Arms extended, till noon
With one leg strung up
Like a cow being butchered?)
(Translation mine.)

The characters in komedya scripts are invariably divided into two camps. In *comedia de santo*, the *bida* (hero/heroine) would be the saint or the good, moral, pious individuals, while the *kontrabida* (villain/villainess) would be the devil or the bad, immoral, impious characters. In the komedya or moro-moro, the protagonists would be the Cristianos and the antagonists would be the Moros, both by virtue of their religions. In each of these camps, the characters were further ordered according to a strict hierarchy, from the rey to the principes/princesas to the *consejeros* to the *soldados* and *villanos* on the Christian side, and from the *Sultan/Emperador* to the *principes/princesas* and the *consejeros* on the Muslim side. Both camps usually have their own *pusong* or *locayo*.

The komedya de santo is typified by the *Comedia de San Miguel* of Iligan City, which is a virtual hagiography on boards. Luzbel, the most powerful angel, organizes an army and rebels against God. God sends Michael the archangel to quell Luzbel's revolt. Luzbel is defeated and turned into a seven-headed dragon. He is then thrown to hell where he is punished together with the other *yawa* (devils). Like other lives of saints, the play is primarily didactic, in this case, illustrating the evil of the capital sin, pride (Tiongson 1999, 79-189).

Secular komedya or moro-moro is exemplified by the *Comedia de Atamante y Minople* of Kalayaan, Laguna. Here the infant Atamante, crown prince of Berona, is thrown away because the second wife of the King wants her own son Minople to succeed to the throne. But Atamante is saved and raised by a hermit. After many years, Atamante's half-brother, Minople, finds out about his older brother and decides to look for him and restore him to Berona. Not recognizing each other, the half brothers meet in the torneo held for the hand of the Moorish princess Laudamia. Atamante kills Minople and finds out too late that

he has slain his own brother. In the end, Atamante returns to Berona and is crowned king, with the newly-baptized Laudamia as his queen (Tiongson 1982, 135-259).

Commercial productions of the komedya were organized by impresarios who booked performances in closed theatres like the Teatro Circo de Bilibid on Azcarraga St. In these theatres, a komedya would usually be performed from 8 to 11 p.m., for two consecutive days. On the other hand, community productions of the komedya were organized by a *Comite de Festejos* or organization of elders who chose the main sponsors called *hermano* and *hermana* (literally, “brother” and “sister”) for the fiesta. The latter took care of expenses relating to the komedya (costumes, sets and props, brass band, food).

The komedya was usually staged for two or three days, in the morning, afternoon or evening, on a raised platform located at the central plaza of the barrio or town. A typical komedya stage would be that of San Dionisio, Paranaque, which has three levels, a balcony on the second level, two passageways on the first level and a *bundok* or mountain on the right side. The San Dionisio set becomes: (1) a *sala* (hall) with the addition of a throne at the center, for scenes of royal councils or wedding or justice; (2) a *hardin* (garden) with the addition of a chair and a potted plant, for scenes of romance between a prince (sometimes disguised as a gardener) and a princess; (3) a *plaza* (public plaza), with the king and princess sitting on the balcony on the second floor looking down at the *torneantes* (tournament participants) below; and (4) a *gubat* (forest), if the characters enter from the side of the mountain.

Lights are used principally for illumination or focus and hardly to indicate mood or time of day. Secondly, sounds are used mainly for amplification of voices, and sometimes for background music of sentimental love scenes. Special artifices may be constructed as required by the script. In *Principe Villarba*, a whale (a bamboo and papier mache fish rolling on wheels) devours Villarba, while a boat (also on wheels) “sails” on center aisle in the middle of the audience all the way to the stage to deliver the prince.

The director of the komedya is the over-all authority, who usually also acts as *apuntador* (prompter) and is assisted by a *director de musica* (the band leader), *director de magia* (who takes care of special artifices like birds flying and giant flowers opening) and *traspunte* (stage manager).

Personahes of the community komedya join the production as part of a *panata* or vow, made to the patron saint in exchange for favors asked or received. To be a komedyante, the barrio recruits have to learn the *dicho* or the sing-song delivery of verses, the *mustra* or gestures that accompany the verses, the *marchas* (including the grand *marcha cristiana*, the *marcha mora*, the *pasadoble*) and the *batalla* movements (*giri*, *carranza*, *laban*) as well as the fencing patterns of the *torneo* (tournament for the hand of the princess) and the *ejercito* (for going to battle with a hostile army).

Costumes of the secular komedya indicate a distinction in terms of religion (black or dark colors for Christians, red for Moors), and the hierarchy of authority. Thus the King wears a crown, band and the big cape; the prince has a band, sword, tricorne hat called *trespicos*; and the *consejeros* sport smaller hats, capes and swords. The sultan wears a band, cape and turban, while the Moorish princess sports a band and a wide-brimmed hat. The *pusong* wear everyday clothes, sometimes inside out or askew, and carry swords of bamboo which are either too long or too short or broken.

Music is provided by a brass band, with basic instruments like drums, trumpets, clarinets, saxophones. These play the accompaniment for the *marchas* (slow *marcha cristiana*, fast *pasadoble*), the *batalla* (music for fighting) and *escaramusa* (a waltz to which *torneadores* dance).

Messages of the Traditional Komedya

The traditional komedya served to strengthen and perpetuate the colonial-feudal status quo of the Spanish period by: (a) reaffirming

the pueblo's hierarchy of authority; (b) preaching the superiority of Christianity over all other religions or beliefs; (c) asserting the superiority of the Europeans over all other races; and, (d) spreading a culture of fantasy.

No komedya could be staged in a town without the blessings of the friar curate who approved or supported the staging of the komedya, the landlords who spent for the whole production, and the landlords' subordinates (household, *encargados*, *kasama*) who helped to build the stage, cook the meals and even stage the play. And as this hierarchy blessed and supported the komedya as an offering to the townspeople on the feast of the patron saint, the production itself, even as it entertained the rural audiences, in turn legitimized this hierarchy, gratefully acknowledging its "altruism" and "dedication" to the town's patron saint who must be appeased with a komedya on his/her feast or else the harvest would be poor. And as this pueblo hierarchy was legitimized (from *cura* and *alferez*, to *gobernadorcillo* and landlord to *indio* and peasant), so was the hierarchy of the larger colony affirmed (from rey to *gobernador-general* and *arzobispo* to *alcalde mayor* and *obispo* to *cura* and *alferez*). An important message of the komedya was that the king's authority is absolute and unassailable, as evidenced in the saying "Utos ng hari/Hindi mababali" (The order of the king cannot be broken).

Second, the komedya endorsed the Christian religion, specifically Catholicism, as the one true religion that would prevail over all others. In the play, all other faiths were summarily condemned: the religion of Imperial Rome represented by Jupiter, Mercury and Pallas, which persecuted Christianity but which Christianity eventually conquered; Islam of the Middle East, represented by Allah and Mahoma, principal enemies of Christianity in Europe in the Middle Ages and in the Philippines from the 16th to the 19th centuries; and the native animism of the archipelago which Spain tried to eradicate but which persisted, especially among natives who resisted Spanish rule.

Of all these religions, Islam was considered the most evil and dangerous, perhaps because the Moros in the Philippines could never be

completely contained by the Spanish. Through the komedya the Moros were demonized so that colonized Christians or indios learned to despise and fear them, rendering a possible alliance of native Muslims and native Christians against Spain an impossibility.

Third, the superiority of Christianity also implied the superiority of the race to which Christians belonged. In the komedya script, Christians are characterized as noble and brave while the Moors are cowardly and ignoble. In performance, the Christian characters overwhelm the Muslims in sheer number and in costume pageantry. Most of all, Christians are considered the beautiful race because they are tall, high-nosed, and fair skinned, thereby downgrading the brown race to which the majority of indios belonged as ugly and inferior.

Fourth, the komedya created and propagated a culture of fantasy that defied the laws of geography, history and logic. Spanish writer Vicente Barrantes noted the illogicalities in a local komedya he saw, Honorato de Vera's *Doña Ines cuello de garza y el Principe Nicanor*. He asks: How can the Moros of Granada interfere in the private problems of Portugal and Castille? How can there be a caliph of Granada when there was only one in Spain, that in Cordoba? Since when were there tigers and hyenas in Portugal? And why is there so much fainting that even men faint? Only Portugal is called Christian and not Castille, why so? (Barrantes 1889, 127-131, 136-138).

In the make-believe world of the komedya, fantasy was generated by bright and luxurious costumes which used expensive fabrics and accessories, and by magical artifices like a giant rose opening its petals one by one to reveal a princess at its heart, a princess riding a huge bird whose wings actually flap, a princess ascending to heaven accompanied by the Virgin and an angel, and magic birds delivering letters. To live in such an artificial world, if only for a few weeks, could be addictive and corrosive. In his *Viajes*, Juan Alvarez Guerra noted how two poor abaca workers in Albay were fished out of anonymity and pampered as princesses of the komedya for two months and then thrown back into anonymity after. Apparently, the trip back to reality

was so shocking that the two girls decided they wanted more of the fantasy and luxurious life. To achieve that, one turned into a thief, the other sold her body (Alvarez Guerra 1887, 167-168).

By and large, with its values and messages, the komedya served as a potent tool of the colonial and feudal establishment to tighten and strengthen its hold on the native population.

Indigenization of the Komedya

The komedya has survived in the Philippines for more than 400 years and it could not have done so if it had not been supported and accepted by many Filipinos as their own. If one were to look back at the history of the komedya, the process of indigenization seems to have been effected in five major ways.

First, according to Isabelo de los Reyes, who defended the komedya against the attacks of Severino Reyes and other sarsuwelistas in 1902, the komedya may have been brought here by Spain, but it has become truly Filipino: (a) because, although the stories may be derived from European sources, the customs depicted in it are ours, like those relating to courtship and marriage (*pamamanhikan*, *pagbibiyenan*, *pagsunod ng balo sa kabaong*); (b) because fighting is really depicted in dance among tribes like the Igorot in the Philippines; (c) because the fantastic stories and events of the komedya are not the product of “ignorance” but a form of literature called folklore, examples of which he himself collected in his book *El Foklore Filipino*. Moreover, de los Reyes says, the komedya is as legitimate as Chinese opera, because they have the same gold-embroidered costumes, stylized delivery of lines, arrogant ambassadors, fighting in dance, scenes of enchantment, and audiences who bring their own food. Similarly, the komedya is like Japanese drama (*kabuki*?) in the length of performances (which last for several days), depiction of princes as heroes, fighting with music, enchantment and magic (especially, the birds which foretell the future), and the lamentative tone of princesses (Reyes 1904, 2-12, 24-29, 36-37).

Second, in using the native languages, the komedya necessarily got indigenized to some degree, localized even, depending on the specific language used – Tagalog, Ilocano, Cebuano, and so on. Every native language contains the words and phrases for objects of material culture as well as concepts and values of the non-material culture of the people speaking that language. The use of that language, therefore, would necessarily turn into Tagalog or Ilocano or Cebuano, the thought and speech patterns, the customs and traditions, the worldviews and values, found in any piece of literature, including the komedya script. Even when the characters of the komedya were imported from European and Middle Eastern kingdoms, and even when these characters were played by mestizos who tried to pass themselves off as Europeans in features and fashion, these characters were at once localized the moment they opened their mouths and declaimed their verses in Tagalog or Ilocano or Cebuano. And once the native words were released, they connected to an audience that thought and felt in that language, establishing a dialogue and synergy that located the play even deeper in the culture of that native tongue. Note how the words of the pusong Daguldul and Nubio in *Orosman* identify them as Tagalog of the late Spanish period (Medina 1990, 96):

Daguldul: Ako’y kaduwag-duwagan
 Duwag pa sa mga Sanglay
 At ako’y taluntalunan
 Madlang lasing sa barikan.

(I am the absolute coward
 More cowardly than a Chinese
 And I am the ultimate loser
 In any drinking bout.)

Nubio: Ikaw ay nagbubulaan
 Vamos haber ang cedula personal
 Aking pagkakakilanlan
 Kung ikaw ay mamamayan.

(You are such a liar
 Let’s see your tax certificate
 And identification which proves
 You are a resident of this town.)
 (Translation mine)

Third, there were attempts on the part of some writers to use the komedya as a way of making statements about the colonial situation under Spain. In 1840, the Spanish Sinibaldo de Mas reported that a komedya was being prepared for the fiesta of Santa Cruz, Laguna which meant to expose the abuses of the Spanish alcalde mayor, the governor of Laguna, especially the arbitrary way in which he sent people to jail. Unfortunately, the alcalde's spies found out about it and the play never got to open (Mas 1963, 157). In like manner, Francisco Baltazar used historical events in far-away places to allude to Philippine conditions, which one could not depict realistically due to censorship and for fear of incarceration. One such komedya was *Mahomet at Constanza* (ca. 1857), which drew a parallel between Greeks and Filipinos, versus Turks and Spaniards, in depicting the rebellion of the Greeks against the Turks in 1828. Again, the authorities got wind of the play's intention and Baltazar had to withdraw the performance (Cruz 1906, 139). Apparently, censorship on dramas was more stringent than on metrical romances or the latter were a better medium for protest, because Baltazar was able to depict in *Florante at Laura* the colonial abuses that he probably also wanted to expose in *Mahomet* but failed.

Fourth, if censorship could ban a komedya from the stage, no one, not even the friar or alferéz, could censor the words and antics of the pusong or locayo. The Augustinian Joaquin Martínez de Zúñiga described the pusong in a komedya that he saw (Zúñiga 1973, 80):

The comedians are lavishly dressed, with knapsacks on their shoulders, in which they carry wine and food. They partake little by little while doing funny acts and displaying ridiculous behavior. This makes the crowd die of laughter. Certain contortions of their bodies... threatening one of the characters from behind (pretending to knock the fellow on the head), and other similar gestures entertain the audience so much that many see the show only to watch the comedians... After a comedia, a comedian goes on stage to give his comments on the play, citing its glaring defects, and in imitation of the comedians of Athens, relates the frauds of those who think that

they can write plays; then he criticizes some of the actuations of the public servants. Everyone laughs including the targets of the jokes who laugh wittingly or unwittingly.

In Baltazar's *Orosman at Zafira* (1857), the pusong alludes to the *guardia civil* who could hang indios up by their arms or legs in jail, simply because they did not bring their *impuesto* and *cedula personal* or personal documents (Medina 1990, 95-97). In the performance of *Atamante at Minople* in San Antonio (1974), the pusong wore boxer shorts over his pants, scratched his crotch every so often, farted several times and feigned defecation as the king pompously held court. He repeated lines of royal characters in mock-heroic tone and fought his fellow pusong with a short bamboo sword. As this scholar observed in 1999 (Tiongson 1999, 35):

Through his scripted and spontaneous comments and his ad lib gestures and movements, the clown punctured the pretensions of the komedya and its world of royal make-believe and questioned the inviolability of its authoritarian characters. By extension, the pusong likewise satirized social and political practices that mimicked the culture of the overlords or took advantage of the weak; and by addressing the bodily lower stratum, ridiculed standards of morality and good conduct that the colonial and feudal establishment had set up for the natives to follow as a sine qua non of "civilization."

The same spirit of irreverence is found in the sainetes and entremeses which characteristically served as intermissions or enders of the komedya. Like the pusong, these comic skits pulled the indio audiences down from the rarefied heights of royal kingdoms to the far from ideal lives they actually led, to conditions bereft of comfort or rights. The classic sainete is Baltazar's *La india elegante y el negrito amante* (1860) which exposes the colonial mentality of natives like the ita Kapitan Tomeng, who must put on the costumes of a Spanish gentleman in order to court the *india* Menangge, who rejects him anyway because he is black and from the mountains. Similarly, like a

pusong, the street sweeper, Uban, takes pot shots at the komedya itself which he says has nothing to offer but “posturings and leaps, swaggering and stamping, enough to knot one’s entrails” (Flores et al 1973, 3-16; translation mine).

Fifth, and most significant of all, the komedya was indigenized because it played a vital role in the way the natives related to the sacred. On the personal level, the komedya provided the native devotee with an opportunity to observe a panata, made in exchange for favors requested from the patron saint for oneself or for a loved one (e.g. recovery from an illness, employment in a desired job, funds for a family emergency, and, more recently, passing an entrance or board exam or getting a job abroad). The vow is made simultaneously with the request and must be honored whether or not the request is granted. Fulfillment of the vow may take the form of self-flagellation during Holy Week or participation, without remuneration, in the komedya which is held on the feast of one’s heavenly benefactor.

Sometimes the vow is not only personal but also communal, as is the case with the *Arakyo* of Peñaranda, Nueva Ecija (Tiongson 1999, 193-217). When this writer documented the two-day, day-and-night performance on stage and on the street of the story of Elena and Constantino and their search for the Santa Cruz (Peñaranda’s patron saint), audiences came and went without surcease, and when they were there, whether young or old, they talked with each other incessantly. In fact, hardly anyone seemed to be really paying attention to what was being said or enacted on stage (except when there was a chase or wrestling, or when the komedyantes brought down the “mountain” structure at the back). Perhaps the audiences were already familiar with the story which was performed from year to year, or maybe the style of the komedya no longer appealed to a TV generation. But what was clear as day was that in the *Arakyo*, the play was **not** the thing, meaning what mattered more was not so much the story or its dramatization on stage; what mattered was simply that the play was performed. The secondary role of the performance was further underscored when, at about 3 p.m. on the last afternoon of performance on the fiesta day itself, the audience suddenly

swelled in number, or rather, the performers suddenly multiplied, as some elderly women climbed onto the stage and joined the performance, carrying bamboo swords as they marched like a *pusong* at the end of a line of Christians or Moorish soldiers. Soon after, the performance of the play stopped and the band played an endless medley of traditional melodies to the jaunty *balitaw* beat. All the actors, male and female, danced, and so with the women who were now joined on stage by other women – old, middle-aged, young. Then, young mothers with babies in their arms either came onto the stage to dance or asked the actors to carry their babies as the actors danced to the catchy festive music. As the band played on, the *komyedya* quickly filled with people and soon one saw a whole community dancing and moving in earnest devotion as one, performing what we later found out was the *pantot* or *pandot*. While the dancing was going on for more than 30 minutes, actors returned babies to their mothers and accepted more babies from other mothers, while the women on stage, in *bestido* or *kimona* and *saya*, waved fans or scooped the air with cupped hands as they swayed to the *balitaw* beat. Only after everyone had grown tired and retired from the stage did the *komyedya* resume, hastily and peremptorily rushing to conclude the play with the defeat and baptism of the Moros and the presentation of the copy of the script and other emblems of the *komyedya* to the representatives of next year's *hermanos* (Tiongson 1999, 586-589).

Coming home from the research trip, we looked up the word “*pantot*” or its variant “*pandot*” in the *Vocabulario* of Noceda and Sanlucar (1860) and found its meaning: “un sacrificio solemne” or “a solemn sacrifice.” The dictionary also gave examples of how the word could be used in different ways: “*pinagpandotan*,” the place where the sacrifice is held; “*mamandot*” the shaman who performs it; “*ipinagpandot*,” the person/s for whom the sacrifice is held; and “*magpandot*,” to perform the sacrifice (*ibid.*, 237).

Later, the meaning of the word “*pandot*” was also confirmed by Fray Juan de Plasencia's “*Customs of the Tagalogs*” (1589), which noted that the Tagalogs celebrated a “festival, which they called *pandot*, or ‘worship’” (Plasencia 1589/1973, 185-191). The worship, which was also

called *magaanitos*, was attended by a whole barangay or family in the large house of a chief, which for that occasion and purpose was called a *simbahan* or place of worship. In these pandot, a male or female shaman called *catalonan* presided, chanting poetic songs in front of the image of the god which was anointed with perfume and dressed in fine cloth and jewelry. The *catalonan* would then go into a trance as the god entered him/her and partook of the offering – goat, fowl or swine – which was flayed, beheaded and offered to the god. (In some cases, the blood of the animal was rubbed on the faces of the supplicant and all participants). Later, after being intoxicated, the participants cooked the offerings and ate them. Plasencia (*ibid.*, 191) listed the reasons for holding the pandot, which included, aside from personal matters, “the recovery of a sick person, the prosperous voyage of those embarking on the sea, a good harvest in the sowed lands, a propitious result in wars, a successful delivery in child birth, and a happy outcome in married life.”

Then it hit us like lightning. The komedya and pandot are presented as a solemn sacrifice to the Holy Cross to ensure blessings on the community, in much the same way that the pre-colonial tribal rituals were held by the Tagalogs to request their native gods to grant the supplicant’s request. If one were to draw a parallel, therefore, the supplicant in the *Arakyo* would be the community and hermanos asking for a good harvest and good health for old and young alike; the god/anito would be the patron Santa Cruz; the sacrificial animal or pig would be the komedya itself, while the actual act of sacrifice would be the dance of the pandot, with the women, young and old playing the part of the shaman that presided over the ritual of sacrifice. As the tribal shaman danced herself/himself into a trance, so the women of the pandot danced themselves into a climax, beside the sacrifice itself, the komedya, embodied by the komedyantes. And as the tribal shaman rubbed the faces of the supplicant with blood from the slain animal, in a gesture identifying the sacrifice with the supplicant, so the women danced with the actors or delivered their babies to the komedya actors to be carried and touched by them, as the supplicant’s face was touched with the pig’s blood.

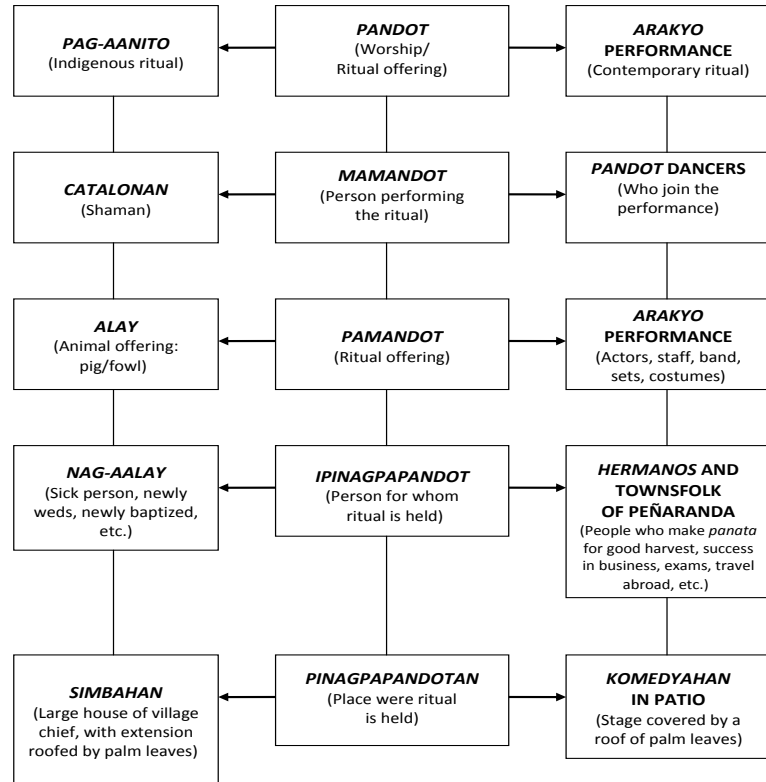
In Peñaranda, many activities were held to celebrate the feast of the Santa Cruz, including the religious processions, the masses and novenas, the feasting in private houses; but the soul of the celebration, the high point of the festivities, happened not in the Catholic church (which had banned and banished the dance-prayer of indigenous performances and rituals from its premises), but in the plaza outside the church, which is central still to the community, on a stage roofed by palm leaves (which paralleled the palm-covered *simbahan* used for old *anito* rituals), in the very heart of the *komedya* performance – the dance of the *pandot*.

In the *anito* ritual as in the *komedya-pandot*, the triadic relationship between the community, the sacrifice and the supplicant continued to live four hundred years after it was recorded by Plasencia. In this sense was the *Arakyo*, in spite of its foreign origin, as indigenous as the primordial *pag-aanito* held in the house of the village chief, in the bosom of the ancient indigenous community. In fact, it may be said that the *pag-aanito/pandot* of the pre-colonial Tagalogs has survived and prevailed in the *komedya/pandot*, co-opting the very religion that had tried to exterminate this animistic ritual for centuries.

And if it was the community, not the play that was the thing, then one understood the circumstances and characteristics of the production. Why were the dances between scenes so long? Because they encouraged socialization, participation and interaction among people through entertainment, the way the dances did in pre-Christian rituals. Why did the search for the cross have two groups of *komedyantes* (only one was needed to advance the plot of the play) going from house to house for many hours at night? Because this was the way the sacrifice (*komedya*) was validated by the supplicants/*hermanos*, the way by which the offering was attached/equated to the various supplicants/donors, the way the blood of the pig was rubbed on the faces of supplicants in ancient *pag-aanito*. Why did the *pandot*, which was strictly speaking not related to the story being enacted on stage, become the climax of the performance, and why did the audience treat the play simply as the frame and context of the *pandot*? Because

the play was just the lowly sacrificial animal but the pandot was the sacred act of communicating with the anito itself. Why was the same story staged year in and year out anyway? Because it was the one that sang the praises of Peñaranda’s anito, the Santa Cruz.

Figure 1. Pandot Correspondences



And if the play was to become acceptable as an offering, it had to be new and fresh every time, and very much from the present. This was why the arakyo, even if it told of kingdoms in a European medieval past, was always anchored in the Philippine present. Komedia costumes, which have always been criticized for being anachronistic or “wrong” for the period of its stories, were in fact “correct” and “proper” because they had to be current. Thus, the komedia’s symbolic bands,

sashes, swords and capes were always worn over contemporary, even fashionable, pants and dresses and with new, fashionable shoes. In this way were the eternal symbols of the komedya incarnated in the present and the present sublimated into the metaphysical, in much the same way that ancient carved likha or anito from generations past were dressed in fresh clothes and jewelry for every ritual of sacrifice in ante-colonial Tagalog communities. In the same vein, in the script and the performance of the play itself, the execution of Fernando and Lucero was described as happening on the day of the komedya performance itself, whatever that day might be from year to year. In a word, the komedya always had to be in the present, because it was “**that** year’s” offering of **this** community and **these** sponsors to the Holy Cross, the annual renewal of the communal/personal vows, the necessary offering to ensure the continued goodwill of the anito called Santa Cruz on the Peñaranda community.

The Revitalization of the Komedya

But today the komedya is called upon to also play a larger role in the creation of a national theatre in particular, and in the building of the nation in general. As the dramatic form that has the longest history (412 years) and the widest area of performance in the past and the present (all areas speaking the eight major languages, and more), the komedya deserves to be studied, preserved, revived, and revitalized. Being the oldest of only four traditional genres with Hispanic influence (the others being the *sinakulo*, *sarsuwela* and *drama*), it has been indigenized in different ways by Filipinos and cherished by them for many generations. It is a cultural form that the country cannot allow to simply die or fade away, because it is precisely cultural forms like the komedya that give Filipinos their distinct and unique character as Filipinos. (Note that Filipinos, Malaysians and Indonesians have common wellsprings of pre-colonial culture but became what they are because their cultures grew apart under the Spanish, British and Dutch respectively, giving them their present cultural identities.)

At the same time, however, the komedya, like other traditional forms, cannot be simply preserved the way it is, because (1) as a living form, it needs to grow with the times and the people, and (2) it is still bound in many ways by colonial and feudal values which it needs to outgrow. Considering the fact that the country is struggling to become a more equitable society with no bias against any race, religion or sector, the new komedya must avoid stories and messages that are anti-Muslim, colonial, and elitist – in general, messages that are anti-people in values and orientation. Thankfully, several new komedya have already succeeded in doing this. San Dionisio's *Prinsipe Rodante* (1962), changed the image of the Moro from cruel enemy to benevolent brother, while some komedya, like Dongalo's *Dumagat* (1975), replaced the Christian-Moro conflict with one between native tribes. To avoid endorsing the European race and the elite, some komedya have used characters and settings that are not historically identifiable, while others have stories that are allegorical, like *Prinsesa Perlita* (1969), or even fabular, like *Prinsesa Manok* (ca. 1973).

In addition, the new komedya needs to adapt to the hectic pace of urban life. With fast-paced shows on TV and film, and the limited time allotted for entertainment in a typical working person's day or week, the komedya has to be shortened to the length (2-3 hours) of a three-act play or 3-hour movie. This means concentrating on one major conflict, reducing the number of characters, eliminating repetitive verses in the dialogue, drastic editing of marches, pasadobles and batallas, a more active/imaginative use of lights to facilitate scene changes, exits and entrances and create mood or focus, more creative use of music not only for marches and battle scenes but to help build emotional tension throughout the play.

In the last four decades, the new komedya has taken shape under two conditions of performance in the Metro Manila areas: on the open-air entablado in the central plaza of a barrio, as in San Dionisio or Dongalo, Parañaque and on the stage of an enclosed formal theatre in cultural institutions like the CCP or academic institutions like the

University of the Philippines (U.P.) in Manila and Diliman. Each of these performance venues is associated with specific funding structures, production processes, artistic personnel, and audiences, and therefore, a different set of aesthetic standards.

In 1962, progressive civic leaders of San Dionisio, Parañaque, headed by Dr. Angel Mendoza, wanted to introduce changes into the traditional komedya, which still had anti-Muslim messages, took two to three days to finish and was unwieldy in terms of verse delivery, marches and batallas. With the intention of shaping the komedya into a legitimate theatre form, Dr. Mendoza asked Atty. Max Allanigue to create a new script. Allanigue delivered *Prinsipe Rodante* after a month (Mendoza 1976, 168-169). In this “improved” komedya, the villain is no longer the Moro but the Christian prince Alvaro, who refuses to acknowledge the victory of Prinsipe Aladin in the torneo held for the hand of Christian Princesa Floresca, simply because Aladin is a Moro. *Prinsipe Rodante*, Alvaro’s younger brother, allies with Aladin against Alvaro, and eventually marries Aladin’s sister, Princesa Porciana. In the end, Porciana is stabbed accidentally when her father tries to kill Alvaro. But the Virgin Mary appears and raises Porciana from the dead (Allanigue 1962).

To pump new blood into the komedya, Dr. Angel Mendoza asked Dr. Felicidad Mendoza, a dentist at St. Paul College, Manila and Parañaque, to direct the new script. In order to shorten the performance into the length of a three-act play, marches and pasadobles were minimized. However, a new march was introduced for the Moorish camp. Batallas too were abbreviated and now featured combatants in more “realistic” wrestling matches (*buno*). Set and costumes remained traditional, but Dr. Mendoza introduced a new way of delivering verses, not with a high pitched, but with a modulated voice. This new style was praised by a critic as having “dignity, grace in diction and easy comprehensibility.” At the time it was staged, *Rodante* caused a sensation in Parañaque. The young Turks were jubilant at having created an important artistic breakthrough for the komedya, but the elders felt that the komedya tradition had been violated, especially

because the director was an outsider. But in time, the innovations introduced by *Rodante* became standard movements in the komedya of San Dionisio, especially after Herminio Hernandez, who came out as Rodante, became the director of the San Dionisio komedya.

About eight years after Dr. Felicidad Mendoza directed *Rodante*, she was invited to participate in the International Theatre Festival in 1970. For this she wrote a komedya based on the metrical romance written by Jose Corazon de Jesus in 1928. *Sa Dakong Silangan* is an allegory about a kingdom called Pulong Ginto, which is ruled by Haring Pilipo and Reyna Malaya, who have three daughters courted by three noble princes. Tragedy befalls the kingdom when Reyna Malaya is abducted and imprisoned in a castle by Cardinal of the kingdom of King Iberio. The princes set out to look for the queen and Bayani succeeds in bringing her back. However, another foreign ruler arrives, Haring Samuel who, through deceit, is able to conquer Pulong Ginto. The natives are divided on how to regard the new ruler. The awit ends with a call to the youth to wake up because the country's freedom is being eroded by foreigners and must be redeemed (de Jesus 1947).

In her adaptation entitled *Princesa Perlita*, Dr. Mendoza followed the allegorical style of the awit but revised its story and central message. In the komedya, the only enemy is Haring Itim (formerly Cardinal) representing Spain while Haring Samuel (the U.S.) becomes an ally of Haring Pilipo against Haring Itim. In changing the story, Dr. Mendoza in effect subverted the anti-imperialist message of Corazon de Jesus and portrayed the second colonizer as a savior and friend of the Filipinos (Mendoza 1976, 205-239).

The production of *Princesa Perlita* followed that of *Principe Rodante*. In the style of the "improved" komedya, *Perlita* was a three-hour play which was no longer about Moros. Instead, it focused on a historical theme and a "nationalistic message." Ironically, while this komedya purports to be new and improved, it is new only in terms of form but its political views are a throwback to the old colonial messages of many a traditional komedya.

In 1994, a new experiment at creating the new komedya was staged in Dongalo, Parañaque, this time with the children of the Dongalo Elementary School, whose principal was a komedya aficionado (Tiongson 1995, 118-148). With funding from an ASEAN Traditional Media project, the CCP staged Francisco Baltazar's *Florante at Laura* as a komedya. *Florante at Laura* was chosen not only because it is a classic work taught in all schools but also because its story about the alliance of forces against tyranny and injustice remained relevant. Desiring to elevate the komedya into higher levels of artistry but still within the context of the community, the CCP commissioned theatre director and actor Jonas Sebastian to write and direct the play (by this time he had already done *Orosman at Zafira* in U.P. and CCP); Salvador Bernal, later National Artist for Theatre Design, to design and build the sets and costumes; Nonoy Froilan, premiere danseur of Ballet Philippines, to choreograph the marchas and batallas with the help of Rodante Hernandez (who had taken over leading roles from his father Herminio) of San Dionisio; and the CCP technical crew to manage the production. A chorus established the setting of scenes, indicated the passage of time, or commented on events and characters. Bernal followed the set conventions of the traditional komedya but executed everything in light bamboo design. Costumes too were based on old designs but made more theatrical. Bernal's version of the *trespicos* was a stylized Roman helmet.

Traditional music for marchas and batallas was used but Froilan introduced folkloric elements, like props and movements from the folk dances *sakuting* and *maglalatik* for the batalya, and *singkil* for the battle with the monstrous bird. For marches, he made the chorus use their bodies to form a ship complete with oars, sails and figurehead, to signify Florante's travel over sea. Froilan also helped to improvise the animal movements to create the bird, the lion and the snake. In the spirit of fun and contemporization, the children actors would burst into chachas and boogies as well as afro and rap beats at certain points in the play.

The komedya was presented in the playground of the elementary school and was seen mainly by audiences from Dongalo and San Dionisio who were familiar with the komedya. Fortunately, the experiment

seemed to have worked because the play was warmly accepted by the audiences. *Florante at Laura* was significant not only for its artistry but especially because it was the fruit of a successful collaboration between traditional komedyantes and artists of the professional theatre.

Like the new komedyas on the open-air entablado, the new komedyas in a closed venue requires script and production to be trimmed down to just a two or three-hour performance which is the normal length of a performance in the modern theatre. But in addition to this innovation, other aesthetic considerations come into play which are demanded both by the venue and its audience of students and theatre enthusiasts. The productions of Francisco Baltazar's *Orosman at Zafira* and Rene Villanueva's *Sandaang Panaginip* illustrate the development of komedyas as consciously created "art form."

After the discovery of the script of *Orosman at Zafira* in 1976, there have been four full productions of the Baltazar opus in Metro Manila. The first was in 1977, designed and directed by Rolando Tinio for Teatro Pilipino. Drastically edited to fit the two-hour running time, Tinio's *Orosman* deemphasized the conventions of marchas and batallas and concentrated on the drama between characters. He was fortunate to have as principal actors Celeste Legazpi and Tommy Abuel who had appeared in *Princesa Perlita* in the 1970s and were therefore familiar with the style of the komedyas. A distinct achievement of this *Orosman* were the costumes designed by Tinio himself which executed "Middle-Eastern" silhouettes in rich fabrics (*Orosman at Zafira* 1977).

The second production of *Orosman* was directed by Jonas Sebastian for U.P. Anak Tibawan of U.P. Manila and staged at the Philamlife Theatre in 1989. Sebastian's main concern was to project the exquisite language of Baltazar, untrammled by stage artifices and effects. He used a chorus to facilitate scene changes and telescope scenes. He removed the pusong because his lines were no longer comic or intelligible to a contemporary audience. Instead he distributed comic lines among different characters. He edited and streamlined scenes of courtship and battle that were repetitive or redundant. He even



changed some characters or the relationships between characters (for example, Abdulcassim became Zelim's father, Zelim became Zafira's cousin, Ben Asar became an old man.)

Actors were all amateur, being U.P. students who just auditioned for the role. Costumes were eclectic, combining *barong tagalog* and Indian shirts and pants with Arabian headdresses and robes for the male leads, contemporary gowns with veils for the female leads, and a curious mix of costumes and headdresses for the chorus. Important props were canes and fans for the major characters, who used them as *arnis* weapons for the *estoque/batalla* and to enlarge their emotional outbursts. The chorus sang their verses to the accompaniment of a guitar and served as props, holding huge flowers for the garden scenes (*Orosman at Zafira* 1989).

The third production of *Orosman* was also directed by Jonas Sebastian, this time for CCP's Tanghalang Pilipino, in the CCP Tanghalang Aurelio V. Tolentino (Little Theatre) in 1993. Here Sebastian used the same edited script of his 1989 production, complete with chorus, but introduced improvisations during the production. For example, Rodante Hernandez, after losing his sword in a combat, pulls out an imaginary gun to shoot his enemy (and the enemy dies from the imaginary bullet). Herbie Go, after being slain by an enemy, exits like Odette in *Swan Lake*.

But the principal contribution/achievement of Tanghalang Pilipino's *Orosman* are the sets and costumes designed by Salvador Bernal (Tiongson 2007, 152-153). Taking off from the set and costumes of the *Arakyo* in Nueva Ecija, the set had a central acting area with two exits and entrances and two ramps on either side going up to a platform at the back. Following the folk sense of color, the costumes were inspired by the *americana cerrada* and *trespicos* of San Dionisio, and the costumes of princesses in Nueva Ecija. Color was used to identify and characterize actors: blue for Orosman, red for Zafira, yellow for Gulnara, pink for Mohamud and green for Abdalap. This production of *Orosman* proved that a komedya



production could have the polish and refinement of any other play of the legitimate theatre.

The most recent production of *Orosman at Zafira*, directed by Dexter Santos of Dulaang UP in 2008, was a rare theatre experience that at once assaulted and delighted the senses, challenged the mind and nourished the spirit. The production went straight to the heart of Baltazar's play and its message: love is what underpins and undermines power, and contradictions in love escalate into the cataclysms of war, which in the end leave everyone devastated. In this war, it is the woman who eventually rises as victor. Around this insight, Santos created his "alternative and modern komedya." First, he trimmed the original play by removing scenes, characters and dialogue, transposed scenes and verses or created new ones, all for the purpose of highlighting the central action through which the theme unfolds. And although he alluded to elements of the komedya (marcha and batalla, mainly), he eschewed the European temper of the komedya, preferring to invest his *Orosman* with a distinct Filipino character. This he achieved by identifying each of the three kingdoms with ethnic or folk elements from Northern Philippines (Marruecos), Bicol and Palawan (Tedenst) and Mindanao (Duquela). In addition to Baltazar's lines delivered as verse, Santos added lyrics which were actually sung. Instead of European-type music, composer Carol Bello composed "trans-dance-world-fusion music." Instead of genteel royal marches and jaunty pasadobles, ethnic-inspired earthy modern choreography served to dramatize the wars between kingdoms. The choice of this type of music was inspired because the visceral quality of the music and the choreography matched the magnitude and grandeur of the komedya's epic conflicts in love and war. The rousing response of the audience was proof that this *Orosman* succeeded as performance. But the production nonetheless left us wondering: Would the folk who see komedya on the open-air stage recognize or accept this *Orosman* as a komedya? How far can one push the form or change its conventions before it ceases to be a komedya? Or is this a question one should not even ask, because artists should be given the maximum latitude to experiment and invent, and perhaps, even redefine what a komedya is or could be?

Sandaang Panaginip by Rene Villanueva was written in 1983 as a parable of the martial law period. The king of Tralala has been ailing, so the king's second wife, the extravagant Leona takes the helm of government. However, Leona proceeds to squander the money that Tralala borrowed from the King of Paratsibum (U.S.) on a shell palace, shopping sprees and shows to help her subjects forget their problems. When Paratsibum demands payment of the loans, Tralala reneges on its obligation. So Paratsibum goes to war. Meanwhile, Princess Jasmin, the true daughter of the king of Tralala, convinces the people to expose and depose the queen. In the end, Princess Jasmin and the Prince of Paratsibum fall in love and are proclaimed king and queen of Tralala.

The first production of the play was directed by Joel Lamangan for Bulwagang Gantimpala. Because it was presented in the small experimental space of the CCP, the play deemphasized conventions of the komedya, like the grand marchas and batallas, which needed huge spaces. In the komedya tradition, it made the love story the dominant motif. It also included a pusong, who served as narrator and comedian of the play, although many characters drew gales of laughter because of exaggerated acting and delivery of verses. The impact of the play on audiences was strong, not only because of the acting but because it was a veiled attack on Imelda Marcos and her expensive projects. Curiously, the komedya exonerated the dictator himself from the crises besetting the kingdom.

In 2007, *Sandaang Panaginip* was revived at the Ateneo de Manila University. Interestingly, the director Jerry C. Respeto, who had acted in the two closed venue *Orosman* productions of Jonas Sebastian, decided to stage the play on an open-air entablado, not in one of the theatres of the Ateneo campus. Moreover, guided by the aesthetics of an open-air performance, the director used the traditional marchas and batallas of the komedya. And cognizant of the MTV generation that would come to see the play, he had original music composed for new songs which the original play did not have. In the same vein, a video screen was erected on stage to create effects of fantasy. To update the play which originally alluded to the Marcoses, allusions were now

made to another queen in government who ruled with a smirk and an iron fist (*Sandaang Panaginip* 2007).

The last four decades have seen a number of productions of the new komedya, whose orientation and values were more consonant with the times. These productions enjoyed different degrees of success, but as a whole, they are proof that the new komedya can relate to audiences, whether in the barrio or the city, on the open-air entablado or in a closed venue – but only if they are willing to undergo drastic changes in script and production. These changes, when done with understanding and care, enrich the form and help to make it grow and relate more meaningfully to its myriad audiences.

Conclusion

Because it has been proven that the komedya can respond to the changing times and because the nation needs to develop its own unique forms of expression through which it can define its own identity, everything must be done to ensure the survival and growth of this our most ancient dramatic genre. Following the example of komedya enthusiasts like Dr. Felicidad Mendoza who researched on the komedya all over the country and organized the first komedya festival in 1975 at the Folk Arts Theatre, succeeding generations of komedya scholars, artists, and aficionados should make strategic plans to ensure the komedya's survival and development. Perhaps a festival such as this Komedya Fiesta of the U.P. College of Arts and Letters is the perfect setting for making these plans, which this writer hopes will include the following:

(1) The Creation of New Komedya

Urgently needed are: the continuing creation of new komedya which could be encouraged through the establishment of komedya scriptwriting contests (on the local or national level); the awarding of grants to support the production of winning komedya scripts; and the collaboration

of traditional komedyante with professional theatre artists in the city, because each can enrich the other. As we observed in an earlier work: “Left to themselves, each of these artists are handicapped: the traditional, by the shackles of custom and convention; and the modern, by their lack of roots in the country’s tradition. Together, however, they stimulate each other’s creativity and bring their best to every endeavor” (Tiongson 1999, 39). Perhaps this collaboration could be facilitated if theatre arts students in the university (like U.P.) actually took theoretical and practical courses on the production of komedya and other traditional forms, and likewise, if traditional artists could attend workshops that could hone their artistic skills in professional theatre arts.

(2) Promotion of the Komedya

As of now only a few people have heard or ever seen a komedya. That circle of people must be widened until everyone in the country knows and appreciates the komedya and understands why it should be developed and supported. To effect this change in consciousness, komedya artists, scholars and supporters from all over the country should come together to form an alliance of komedya groups. Such an alliance could formulate and execute plans to ensure the survival of the komedya. Even as the different regions produce new komedya, these new plays should be showcased in festivals and, especially in print, TV and film. Perhaps, the next komedya festival could be in Cebu or Antique or other places which still have or used to have the komedya.

(3) Research and Dissemination

The gathering, processing, analysis and dissemination of data regarding the komedya must continue, because this is how new interpretations, elements, and techniques of komedya everywhere are discovered. Academic and cultural institutions should evolve a research agenda for the komedya, and more than this, effective strategies for disseminating information

and encouraging discussion on the form – perhaps through seminars and conferences. Documentation of komedya performances in print and video should be encouraged and awards bestowed on the best documentation about the form.

This scholar dreams of the time when the komedya will have a theatre of its own where students, foreign visitors and regular folk can see the “classics” of the komedya, the way the Japanese regularly fill the kabuki-za in Tokyo to watch new productions of classic kabuki texts. By then the komedya would have been refined in script and production and be recognized by one and all as a pillar of the Filipino national theatre and an essential component of the cultural identity of all Filipinos.

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