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## Theater Review: Art Collecting or Recycling?

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Quintos, F. (Writer), & Santos, D. (Director). (2013, March 1-3). *Collection*. Wilfredo Ma. Guerrero Theater, University of the Philippines Diliman.



Floy Quintos, by his own admission didn't have an answer when asked, as the playwright of *Collection*, the typical question about this *risky work*. What is *Collection* about? You get that feeling watching the play. What is it about? At every turn you find yourself saying, "Okay, so that's what *Collection* is about." Another income producing scheme? No. Preserving natural treasures? No. Art collecting to the max? No. Each time I thought, "I've got it this time!" Quintos would bring in a different turn, a different dimension, again and again. And, if you were attending with a classmate, as I was, you get even more very different turns. Greed? Maybe. Materialism? For sure. Conspicuous consumption? No doubt about it. But, what do you really come away with after watching *Collection*?

The acting was superb. The Filipino and music, dance and drama just naturally go together. They are true artists worth watching. Worth much more than the P300 admission fee I paid as a UP student. They've got talent in spades. As an African American who has lived in the Philippines for 27 years my sense is that Western art drama, by comparison, tends to emphasize the verbal, the conversation, the words. But *Collection* kept me fixated on the actors. What they wore. Their mannerisms. Their style. More importantly, I was fixated on

what they were not saying. Was *Collection* a demonstration of Filipino talent? Or was it an exercise in reading between the lines?

I was totally occupied by the plethora of things to look at. As a UP student of Anthropology, I would find myself checking out the stage props when suddenly the setting was changed. "Wait! I'm not done looking! So that's it." I'm supposed to remember these things for later? Or, I'm supposed to know at first glance the significance of each? That was another dimension. You had to be very fast and catch it the first time before it was gone. Was that it? The fleetingness of life and things? Get it all while you can!

An echoing motif throughout *Collection* was, "We will find something to sell to the people." After 27 years living in the Philippines (mostly in Palawan), I have never had the feeling that a Filipino was trying to sell me something useless. Is *Collection* a lesson in Manila living?

I think the play was a lesson in recycling ingenuity on a grand scale? Since my arrival in 1986, I have affectionately referred to the Philippines as *the recycling capital of the world*. Recycling is as old as humankind. Older, in fact, as nature recycles itself regularly. However, when serious recycling began in the United States in 1990, I laughed. They know nothing about recycling like the Filipino. Maybe that's why most cities in the United States have given up on recycling. It wasn't cost effective. But I think they just were not creative enough to see remaining value in old things!

In 1987, the *Mobro*,<sup>1</sup> a barge carrying garbage from New York, tried unsuccessfully to get rid of its load in six states and three other countries. The barge traveled 6,000 miles in six months before it was finally allowed to dump its load, consisting primarily of paper, back into New York. "Sayang!" *Mobro* didn't come to the Philippines.

In the Philippines, recycling is a work of art as *Collection* humorously suggests. In Puerto Princesa City, Palawan where I used to live, whenever my *pink* owner jeep broke down, my mechanic

would show up, look around on the ground, find what he needed, and get me back on the road again. One time, he laughingly shouted after me as I drove away from yet another of his successful rescues, “You now have P1.50 holding your steering wheel in place!” He was referring to the six twenty-five centavos coins acting as metal washers literally holding my steering wheel intact. Another time, my jeep broke down on a perfectly clean parking lot of a restaurant. I wondered what the mechanic would find there to get me going again. I watched him closely as he ran out into the street, stopped a passing tricycle driver and Voilá! he got the part he needed! Watching *Collection* was like that, at first. I had that *recycling capital of the world* feeling. When the Banaue Rice Terraces were auctioned off, I thought, “Maybe this is a monumental lesson in recycling!”

In actuality, Quintos has masterfully effectuated what he set out to accomplish with *Collection* according to his “Message From The Playwright” in *Collection*’ Playbill. Halfway through the play, I developed a tremendous headache from the din. The noise was absolutely deafening. The playwright cites two plays as his inspiration for *Collection*: *The Auction of the Ruby Slippers* by Salman Rushdie and a Chapter (“The Hermana”) from *Cave And Shadows* by Nick Joaquin. With the combination of these two works, Quintos wanted to capture their colliding ideas as something he sees taking place in the Philippines. He wanted to create *the noise of the world*. He hears the noise clamor of the sales hucksters along with seeing their hordes of buyers coming together with yet another permeating sound, the noise of the worshipping crowds. If the playwright had based his work on *the noise of the shopping malls*, *Collection* would have likewise been appropriate. I have always been amazed that you could go to the noisy shopping malls and simultaneously see Mass being conducted right in the middle of the mall! Take a time out from your shopping to thank God for the money you have with which to buy more of what you don’t need. Or maybe, take a time out to ask God to forgive you for buying more of what you don’t need. Either way, you get to join in the noise of hucksterism, the noise of the crowds and the noise of

worship. That can't be all bad, can it? Quintos was a genius in capturing these ideas in *Collection*.

In another sense, *Collection* was a parody on the contradictions that exists in a nation's economy. One can ponder sentiments of Marx and Hegel in *Collection*. Everything is in a constant state of flux. The material world and the immaterial world of human thought continue only so far until a new world or new thought replaces the old, or maybe has a synthetic bit of the old in it. Marx's interdependence of the material world and humankind can be heard in the statements of auctioneer, Carlo Vibal, when giving his rationale for selling off the Banaue Rice Terraces. Hegel's dialectical materialism proposes that every economic structure in time progresses (or rather regresses) to a state of maximum efficiency while at the same time creating internal inconsistencies that eventually weaken the structure. These inconsistencies and contradictions are felt throughout the play and sometimes had a Western slant. What was once owned by the people *collectively*, is now owned independently by a single *individual*. Other inconsistencies loom as the rich become richer and the poor become poorer. The rich work less for more while the poor work more for less. There was even a parody of the idea of developing laws of regularity to satisfy the masses with the regulated lottery and scholarship handout programs for the poor. Two-thousand Filipinos would receive P40,000 to alleviate their poverty. Marx would say that *Collection* is an artistic way of handling such contradictions that exist in the Philippine society as a result of Protestant capitalism.

Speaking of religion, the idea was not lost on the viewer. The latest item to be auctioned off was a fake ivory statue appropriately called *The Virgin of Lost Souls*. The statue originally belonged to a so-called simple mountain mystic named *La Hermana Augusta Beata*. What a contrast of characters who now want to *recycle* the *Virgin*. Again, all of them representing some aspect of the Filipino people. The masses want the ivory statue for *collective* worship. The wealthy

want it for prestige and private worship. Health guru, Dr. Stephen Yan wants the ivory piece to obtain mystical health for the physical soul. A fashion designer wants *La Hermana's* treasure to portray some ancient fashion secret he can introduce and combine with his new modern clothing line.

Fear of loss, death, and the unknown were also not lost to the viewer as discussions of owning the statue ensued:

Dr. Yan: "The wealthy don't like talking about death. The soul loses 21 grams at death."

The Hermana: (Viewed by the masses as sorceress then saint then sorceress again.)

Auctioneer Carlo Vibal: (Begins to have guilt felt hallucinations of the Hermana.)

Doña Aqueda: "I will build an altar, a chapel, a church for the Virgin."

Manolo Estancio, buyer of the rice terraces: "Let's get on with it before I lose interest."

Hermana's ghost: "You're afraid, Carlo. Hindi bagay."

Manolo: "I want it and when I want it, everybody wants it."

Doña Aqueda: "I would pay P100 million, same as the Banaue Rice Terraces."

Hermana's ghost: "Carlo, if what you do is right, then my presence shouldn't bother you."

Vibal: "Sold to Manolo Estancio for P300 million! (Manolo promptly drops dead).

And all the while, from the beginning of the play to its climax, there was Gus, representing the conscience of the Filipino people. In his character as college student activist, Gus was forever trying to get a word in edgewise but no one was listening. "That doesn't make it right!" he shouted. But Gus was constantly cut off by Vibal, the auctioneer, "I do not need you to be my conscience."

Quintos adds that he wanted viewers to walk away from the play confused and with a lot of questions on their mind. Okay, so here's a question. What is it that makes nudity a symbol of art? Is it like offsetting the G-rating that movie producers detest? Who buys G-rated movies anyway. That's for the kids. I suppose, if you're striving to be a fine artist yet get squeamish at having to paint, draw, or sketch nude models in the classroom, you are not considered a *true artist* and will probably be redirected elsewhere for your ambitions. Likewise, I suppose, if you want to take in a play and get similar feelings when nudity is portrayed in your face, maybe you don't have a true appreciation for the arts. Don't get me wrong, the human body is beautiful, a true work of art, and we all have one of our own. So, the human body is nothing to be ashamed of. However, its nudity in this play had a shock value that put it way out of place, even for a deranged Hermana. But alas, maybe that was one of the places where the viewer was to be *confused*.

*Collection* portrays a people in search of *the next big thing*. For the Kagayanen people of Palawan, the next big thing might be a carabao chase and fight in the sea. The stage setting of Doña Aqueda's home was littered with all kinds of *collectibles*: African art, statues, Santos, etc. But some items were odd and unfamiliar to me. I imagine one would have to know something about Philippine history to understand what each item represented. I probably wearied my classmate with questions, "What are those goblets with faces?" But he didn't know either. One particular item on a pedestal in a far corner of her *sala* depicted dark bronze-like arms in a criss-crossed shape. Both hands clearly had the familiar six-inch nails in them. I wondered if Doña supposedly had purchased this item thinking gullibly (as was her character), that it was a relic of the arms of the crucified Jesus. Then, interestingly enough, some weeks later, I saw a logo online with that same criss-crossed arms design. It graced the webpage of the *Franciscan Order of the Priesthood*.

Was *Collection* all fanfare, folly, and fiction? Maybe not, if one considers the words of Winter David, in charge of *Collection*' video design, and admittedly a collector at heart himself. David has let it be known that if given the chance, he would like to purchase the UP Oblation and the Manila Cathedral.



### Note

<sup>1</sup>Motor City Free Geek where green is more than just a color. Webpage, June 20, 2011. Ferndale, MI, USA. [http://www.motorcityfreegeek.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=69&Itemid=78](http://www.motorcityfreegeek.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=69&Itemid=78)