

PLAY REVIEW

***Fake*. Written by Floy Quintos. Directed by Tony Mabesa. UP Playwright's Theatre. (May 7-15, 2011 at Teatro Hermogenes Ylagan, Bulwagang Rizal Faculty Center Bldg., University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City, Philippines.)**

Brandon Reilly

Floy Quintos's *Fake* asks us to question our beliefs. How do we know God exists? How can we believe what people say? How can we trust what they write? How do we know that what we see on TV, hear on the radio, or read in books is real? And what does "real" really mean? If enough people believe in something, does that make it real? Or can it still be fake? If it is fake, does that really matter? Through the interactions of its characters, *Fake* dramatizes these questions. The set design is simple, costumes in a few cases are beautifully intricate, and the storyline is one that only those familiar with Filipino culture and history can truly appreciate. But *Fake* is a play to enjoy watching and discussing afterwards. It provides something to think about, regardless of one's beliefs and persuasions.

Act One takes place in the Mountain of Revelations, a place made legendary by Sister Emily (played by Shamaine Centenera-Buencamino/Olive Nieto, understudy), said to have visions of Mary that cause rose petals to fall from the sky. Miguel (Brian Tibayan/Gerard Pizarra) journeys to the Mountain not as a religious pilgrim but as an avowed skeptic. He wants to meet Sister Emily so he can prove she is a fake. He is accompanied by his *babay*-donning Tasaday friend Lobo (Gerald Napoles/Bojong Fernandez). In his childhood, Lobo became the photographic face of the tribe. When the truth about the supposed Stone Age Tasaday was discovered—was it a hoax?—he became the symbol of their duplicity, and has borne the burden of living as a fraud ever since. After they venture deeper into the mountain, another character appears: George (Richard Cunanan) seeks out Sister Emily in the hope that, through her, God may cure his mysterious knee affliction. Miguel returns and strikes up a conversation with George that takes the form of a debate about faith. Miguel fervently professes his disbelief while George coolly explains his religious conviction. Sister Emily arrives last and joins in the discussion. Surprisingly, she seems to agree more with Miguel's characterizations of her as a fraud, if only because it offers a way out of carrying the hopes and dreams of others—a

burdensome responsibility she doubts she can shoulder. Then something takes place that changes all their minds.

Act Two stages a great historical ‘what if’: Jose Marco (Joel Lamangan/Leo Rialp), concoctor of the “Code of Kalantiaw” and of *La Loba Negra* as a literary piece by Fr. Jose Burgos, among other forgeries, meets William Henry Scott (Paul Holme), legendary missionary-turned-historian, and the man who exposed Marco as a fraud (see “The Contributions of Jose E. Marco to Philippine Historiography” in Scott, 1984¹). The two never actually met because Marco died in 1960. Scott finished his dissertation, which would later turn into the book that discredited Marco once and for all, only later that decade. Just before this takes place, we are given a short biopic of Marco’s life through the eyes of his precocious pupil: the Miguel of Act One in his childhood (Ross Pesigan). The act is punctuated by the dramatic soliloquies of “Datu Kalantiao”² (Jerald Napoles; Bojong Fernandez) and “La Loba Negra” (Karen Gaerlan), intricately costumed figures who literally jump off the page. Recall that the so-called Code of Kalantiaw, the supposed prehispanic legal document that became the sole basis for the existence of a “Datu Kalantiaw” and the draconian chiefdom he ruled over, and

La Loba Negra, a sloppy imitation of a novel attributed to Fr. Jose Burgos, were two of the Marco’s better known forgeries, especially the former (on Marco’s forgeries, see Paul Morrow, “Jose Marco: Con Man of the Century”, 2006). As the initially friendly encounter between Marco and “Scotty” devolves into the revelation that will ruin Marco’s career, we see how the bright-eyed young Miguel transforms into the disaffected cynic of Act One.

The essential question *Fake* asks is: “what is the truth?” This question is asked, and in some ways answered, through the dialogues of the characters, with each of them representing some extreme in the debate. Act One frames this question as a matter of personal faith. Is Miguel’s skepticism, even agnosticism, valid? Is there any reason to trust in George’s belief in a world beyond that which we can see and hear? Is Sister Emily really a fraud? Act Two similarly contrasts science and religion, but in a very different way. Scott becomes something of a scientist and Marco something of a priest. But they do not engage in discursive battle, with each contender advancing a view diametrically

¹Originally published in *A Critical Study of Prehispanic Source Materials for the Study of Philippine History* (Manila: Univ. of Santo Tomas Press, 1968).

²This spelling of the character’s name is taken from the program for *Fake* (UP Playwright’s Theatre).

opposed to the other's, as the characters in Act One do. Rather, they move in tandem from a reality where Marco was a discoverer to one where he is a fraud. Opposing personalities—Scott the unemotional professor, and Marco the cultural savior—are juxtaposed rather than letting the works of each man be considered on their merits. Thus, the dividing line between truth and fiction is blurred. The efforts of Marco to fabricate Filipino history and the much more careful, judicious and difficult work of Scott to illuminate it are not made to seem all that different.

It is easy with hindsight to dismiss Marco as nothing more than a profit- and fame-seeking charlatan. What *Fake* helps us to do in Act Two is to recall the historical context in which a fabulist such as Marco found a willing audience (see Michael Salman, “Confabulating American Colonial Knowledge of the Philippines: What the Social Life of Jose E. Marco’s Forgeries and Ahmed Chalabi Can Tell Us about the Epistemology of Empire,” 2009). It momentarily sidesteps the moral dimensions of Marco’s actions and helps us to understand why the documents he “found” became so profoundly meaningful to the increasingly self-aware Filipino people, who were at that moment subsisting under American domination. This is why the myth of the “Code of Kalantiaw” lives on and Marco somehow remains a cultural hero. He affirmed and dignified Filipino-ness at a time when colonialism was (yet again) denying its worth. His vision was so powerful that it relegated questions about the “authenticity” of such documents to the secondary.

While *Fake* offers us a way not merely to be aware of this, but to appreciate, to believe, in this representation of Marco as if it were historically accurate, the narrative of Marco-as-hero should never be taken to be anything other than what it is: fiction. However sympathetic Marco might be made to appear, or, by comparison, however blandly empiricist Scott’s methodology might seem from the play’s portrayal, we should never forget that Marco was, indeed, a fake. He dedicated a few days’ work to creating forgeries that he could and did profit from, not just financially but also in terms of his scholarly reputation. Scott, by contrast, was a thoroughly honest man. He scoured archives all over the world to find authentic primary sources, which he in turn used as the material to write histories of the Philippines that are now classical works. Scott learned a number of local languages, struggled in solidarity with the people against Marco, and, not unlike Sister Emily, dedicated his life to the spiritual uplift of the Filipino people. We can momentarily sympathize with the Jose Marcos of the world, and even understand why they exist. Then, as now, Filipinos yearned for artifacts that would validate the reality of their being. Sympathy, however, must not blind us to the fact that people like Marco are little more than fakes.

References

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