

SARSUWELA IN SARSUWELA: ENDURING STORY OF THE PEOPLE'S THEATER IN THE PHILIPPINES

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Abstract

The Sarsuwela is a meaningful tradition in the Philippine drama. Unfortunately, the contemporary use of the term "sarsuwela" in mass media refers to the antics of politicians that have tainted the word. This paper explores the real meaning of the sarsuwela since its separation from the colonial Zarzuela of Spanish origin. The sarsuwela in our setting is not only theater as entertainment and spectacle but theater as a community and expression of the Filipino soul and aspirations. Using the combined power of language and music as well as poetry and footwork, the Philippine sarsuwela continues to be relevant, intense, and resilient as a form of social commentary.

Keywords: Sarsuwela, Zarzuela, social commentary, mass media, and theater

Introduction

It is a sad disservice that the term "zarzuela" is used not a few times in derogatory manner in the Philippines. Only recently a senior columnist in one of the national papers used "zarzuela" to refer to what he observed as public entertainment between a member of the Congress and the First Gentleman's lawyer's verbal tussle over the alleged multi-billion bank account stashed away abroad by the republic's First Couple. Why the writer would parallel the antics of politicians to a national form of theater that enthralled audiences for centuries here and abroad reveals either a lack of knowledge, if not a blunt sensibility to the cultural development and history of the genre.

On second thought however perhaps the scene is not so strange if we go back to an early accusation against the zarzuela: a "buffoonery" to the assessment of a sullen critic in 17th century Madrid because it lacked the exalted and serious form of the Italian opera patronized by the royal court and the elite in society. Either the elite were excellent pretenders to the throne of taste or they were seriously mesmerized by the performances, but as far as the vote of the public was concerned, the unerring choice was the zarzuela. The 19th century saw the greater popularity of the "zarzuelas modernos" to be explained "perhaps because the audience identified with their stories better than with Italian opera, perhaps because of the simpler music, perhaps simply because of nationalism," and perhaps a combination of all factors.¹ In the Philippines the genre with its music and dances and party scenes appealed to the music-loving Filipino, especially since the stories were neither about imagined Moros and Cristianos fighting each other nor about far-

flung kingdoms and mythical heroes and creatures, but characters who are immediate and familiar they could be anyone and anyone's neighbors.

Zarzuela conventions

Zarzuela, named after the Palacio de la Zarzuela near Madrid that saw actors and entertainers perform before kings in the 17th century, is a lyric-dramatic play that incorporates dialogue with music in the form of songs, dances, and chorus numbers. The phenomenal *Atang de la Rama* of Philippine stage recalls: "A zarzuela has 20 songs divided into *preludio, concertante, solo, dueto, terceto*, and *coro*. A simple tune is played while the curtain lowered between acts." The songs functioned as dialogue, and as asides, commentaries, or soliloquies. Thus the *sarsuwela* as it will be called in the Philippines, differs from the *drama musical* which uses prewritten songs inserted into the prose play. In the *sarsuwela*, the songs were created as part of the text.²

The first Spanish zarzuela brought in the Philippines by the settlers and friars during the period of colonization was *Jugar con fuego* (To Play with Fire, 1851) with music composed by Francisco Asenjo Barbieri and lyrics by Ventura de la Vega. This and a string of other performances (the most profitable of which was *El Barberillo de Lavapiés* also by Barbieri) would receive enthusiastic response from the literary-artistic audiences who were being feted earlier on stage by declamations in verse and in prose, religious dramatizations and short plays, and the Spanish *comedia*.³

Reception of audiences

The Spanish zarzuela enjoyed supremacy for a time until audiences finally wearied of it and found the actresses no longer attractive. The national hero of the Philippines, Jose Rizal, then only 19, wrote the next zarzuela on record, *Junto al Pasig, Zarzuela en un acto y en verso*, at the prodding of his Jesuit teachers at the Ateneo Municipal de Manila.⁴

In 1880, an old actor from Madrid, Alejandro Cubero took over the Teatro Filipino and trained and directed a new breed of young actresses for some 16 years. Over all, his influence paved the way for the revival of the zarzuela, and he would be heralded as the father of Spanish theater in the Philippines. Stage plays in the years thereabouts included the popular zarzuela with songs being sung by colegialas in school and civic programs, and overtures becoming favorite performances in band concerts.

The zarzuela would remain popular as well as controversial. In August 1886 a zarzuela that featured the crowd favorite Yeyeng Fernandez and the comic Valentin Fernandez provoked an irate pastoral letter from the archbishop of Manila, P. Payo, who denounced the performances as "indecorous public spectacles" that served not the interest of morality or good literary taste, but the corruption of customs. Nonetheless, the Spanish zarzuela in the Philippines continued to enjoy a longer prominence culminating on August 17, 1893 with the inauguration of Teatro Zorilla, the largest theater in Manila and home of the zarzuela.

Community in the Philippine sarsuwela

A study on theater in the Philippines would remark that there was hardly any distinction between the Spanish and the Filipino zarzuela in terms of design, content, and character.⁵ Theater historian, director, and playwright Nicanor Tiongson, however, observed differently and proposed the use of the Filipino *sarsuwela* to replace the *zarzuela* of the Spanish flair. All over the islands (Pampanga, Pangasinan, Ilocos, Leyte, Iloilo, Cebu, Bicol, and eventually Manila) the *sarsuwela* was being written and performed, and toured on at least two distinctions: the choice of the local languages, and the choice of subject matter. The new *sarsuwela*, doubtless an indigenized form by this time, broke from the interest of mere entertainment and profit that the colonial theater introduced; instead it addressed contemporary domestic and social concerns revolving on family and society: delinquent children, irresponsible parents, gambling and other vices, irregularities in elections, gap between the rich and the poor as represented by ill-fated lovers. Also the spirit of community was being enhanced. The staging of the *sarsuwela* was a way to bond with one another—sponsors and patrons, actors, playwrights, audiences and generally the townsfolk contributing whatever little they could in terms of money, props, or costumes, to make the production a success.⁶

The first *sarsuwela* features were one-act plays, leading later to full-lengths that titillated the audiences because now they recognized themselves and their own lives performed on stage. For instance Valente Cristobal of Iloilo would showcase the lives of carpenters, stevedores, farm workers, servants, landowners, politicians and policemen, mothers and children not only to expose or attack vice (the *sarsuwela* was “not limited to a passive role of social documentation”), but also to extol moral standards and call for the necessary changes in social attitudes and consciousness.

It was the first quarter of the 20th century that the Philippine *sarsuwela* differed in ways from its Spanish predecessor: Though the conventions of verse and prose, song and dance, music and dialogue, manners and mores, and romantic love and comedy were evident and entertained audiences, the new *sarsuwela* did not resist the patriotic and nationalistic spirit of the times. Severino Reyes’s *Walang Sugat* was a great success with audiences. Two lovers, Julia and Temyong, are separated from each other because of the Revolution against Spain. Julia is being forced by her mother to marry another man, the parish priest’s nephew. Temyong appears in the scene, weak and dying, and begs that he be married to Julia before he dies. After the ceremony is over, Temyong stands unwounded, *walang sugat*, to the shock if not frustration of many, the groom particularly. Even as this *sarsuwela* followed a certain formula, it managed to expose scenes of torture by Spanish friars, a fact of Philippine history.

The record-breaking *sarsuwela* of the time was Hermogenes Ilagan and Leon Ignacio’s *Dalagang Bukid* (Peasant Maiden, 1919), which starred the young and charismatic Atang de la Rama who would later be proclaimed as National Artist of the Philippines. Her popularity was proof that actors enjoyed the privilege not only of celebrity status but more importantly, that of professional prestige and respect. She was only seven when she started singing in Spanish zarzuelas such as *Mascota* (The Mascot), *Sueño de un Vals* (Dream Waltz), *Marina* and *La Viuda Alegre* (The Merry Widow). But it was the Tagalog *sarsuwela* that made her unforgettable to adoring audiences who showered her with silver coins and jewelry, and blooms

of giant roses and jasmines among others. She would be much sought on stage and in town fiesta celebrations that welcomed her arrival on a carriage, boat, or carabao sled arched with flowers, the church bells ringing to signify that the shows were about to start and all betting, games, and circus shows must stop. She performed more than 50 sarsuwela, the most successful of which were *Ang Kiri* (The Flirt, 1926) by Servando de los Angeles and music by Leon Ignacio (700 performances), and *Dalagang Bukid* (with about 1,000 performances, including Aetas as audiences who gave her fruits and garlands of flowers instead of talent fees). In her clogs and Filipiniana dress, no doubt Honorata de la Rama was Queen of the Sarsuwela, although as far as she was concerned, the sarsuwela was not a means of living nor dizzying fame: The sarsuwela is the expression of the Filipino soul.⁷

Mass media vs live stage

The sarsuwela started to decline with the advent of new forms of entertainment: 1) the *bodabil* (vaudeville), a potpourri of American songs, dances, comedy skits, circus acts, and magic; 2) silent movies or the emerging cinema; and 3) and other popular forms of mass media such as the radio and television, which became a staple in Filipino homes. Movie producer Jose Nepomuceno convinced Atang de la Rama and Horacio Morelos to star in the film version of *Dalagang Bukid*, paving the way for the transition from stage to screen of the popular genre. In the next decades ('30s and '40s) screen sweethearts rose to stardom in what may be regarded otherwise as filmed sarsuwela: *Maalaala Mo Kaya?* (Will You Remember?) starring Carmen Rosales and Rogelio de la Rosa; *Bakya Mo, Neneng* (Your Wooden Clogs, Neneng) starring Rosal del Rosario and Leopoldo Salcedo; *Waray-waray* (Nothing) starring Nida Blanca and Nestor de Villa, and so on.⁸

The force and influence of Americanization and the widespread disease of colonial mentality pushed back the sarsuwela as *bakya* or low-brow. Despite the whipping, however, the genre would prove to be a noble survivor. In the '70s and under the regime of the Marcoses, theater groups and individuals trained and exposed to the Europeo-American tradition began to experiment with the sarsuwela as a vehicle for modern communication. Among others *Halimaw* (The Monster, 1971) by Isagani Cruz/Lutgardo Labad dwelt on oppressive monarchy established after the Constitutional Convention of 1971; *Ang Bundok* (The Mountain, 1977) by Amelia Lapeña Bonifacio/Fabian Obispo drew attention to the plight of the mountain tribes of the north fighting against foreign invaders; *Sumpang Mahal* (Sacred Vow, 1976) by Domingo Landicho/Rey Paguio satirized the colonial mentality of the Filipino balikbayan; and *Ms. Philippines* (1980) by Isagani Cruz/Rey Paguio analyzed the dreams and frustrations of beauty contest participants.⁹

PETA and the contemporary sarsuwela

As credit must be given to whom credit is due, at the forefront of the efforts to revive the sarsuwela is the theater group PETA (Philippine Educational Theater Association). Since its inception in 1967, PETA has believed in the evolution of a Filipino national tradition in theater. In a significant move, PETA boldly decided in 1982 to stage Nicanor Tiongson's *Pilipinas Circa 1907* at the Raja Sulayman

Theater in Fort Santiago, Intramuros, Manila. Directed by Soxy Topacio with music composed by Lutgardo Labad, the play tried to blend the traditional and the contemporary currents of Filipino musical culture. Says Labad: "Thus the play employed stylistic features both from the pre-war sarsuwela and then the popular off-Broadway musicale, from Filipino music tradition and from the avant-garde, from folk music tradition and pop music culture."

The inspiration for the play is *Filipinas para los Filipinos* written by Severino Reyes in 1905. Tiongson is approached by St. Paul's College Manila to direct the play but as the plot of the original sarsuwela was too thin and dated for the contemporary audience, Tiongson came up with an adaptation instead, transforming individual motives and personal relations to the real conflict and tensions mounting between the Filipino and the American interests in the economy, politics, culture, and education. After further revisions in characters, songs and music, and dialogue, the final fruit is an original sarsuwela, the modern elements more embedded, even as the period sets back to the turn-of-the-century Philippine society.

A microcosm of the country's condition with Filipino capital pitted against American domination and control is reflected in the relations within a family as the character Don Pardo schemes with his niece's American suitor, Robert, who seeks to take over the major stocks of a tobacco company owned by Nora Pilar, Don Pardo's sister. In return, Pardo is to receive American patronage for his political ambitions. Nora Pilar's daughter, Leonor, is in love however with another young man, Emilio, whose idealism is fired not only with devotion for his beloved Leonor, but also for their love for the motherland. Another pair of lovers, Pura and Andres, shares this idealism with them, and together with the workers in the factory, they resist all attempts of the foreigner and his collaborator, to sabotage production and sales in order to grab ownership of it later. Andres and Emilio are sought by the constabulary as the former joins the armed struggle against the American forces, and the latter writes a poem against American abuse of power in a widely read newspaper, *Muling Pagsilang* (Rebirth). Soon Emilio is captured and his American rival Robert arranges a wedding with Leonor who agrees only because she wants Emilio freed. Robert's American wife appears on the day of the wedding and Robert's true character is exposed. Emilio and Leonor are reunited.

No doubt, Tiongson maintains the ingredients of the conventional sarsuwela: 1) the basic plot of a love story that undergoes tests, but triumphs in the end; 2) the clear distinction between protagonists and antagonists among characters; 3) the end which serves a happy resolution to conflicts; 4) the singing and dancing, with lyrics of songs integral to the message and development of the story; and 5) the element of comedy or use of humor to lighten up the mood or bring attention to follies in human behavior.¹¹ As it is however, *Pilipinas Circa 1907* is all in all an enchanting piece of production, the dialogue an interplay of wit and fire, the music and lyrics poignant and brave, the characteristic sarsuwela of tradition melded with imagination, and not a few times with the poetic spirit, too, alive before an enrapt audience.

In a more recent production and perhaps as a way to mark a milestone in its own history, PETA staged the grand prize winner in the National Commission for Culture and the Arts' 1998 Centennial Literary Prize for the sarsuwela, Mario O'Hara's *Palasyo ni Valentin* (Valentin's Palace) as maiden offering on its 39th season to celebrate the opening of its own home in Quezon City. This contemporized

sarsuwela of a period setting, mixing elaborate costumes and design from the Spanish to the American periods with bonus video clips as background, received critical raves and highly successful runs with young audiences responding enthusiastically to the play.

O'Hara's version of sarsuwela might as well be the story of how true love for the sarsuwela won over all odds against it. Valentin, a lonely and bitter old drunk, manages a crumbling structure called Palacio, the early haven for the American vaudeville, comedies, zarzuela, and other live performances when Filipino, American, and Spanish audiences patronized live theater. A dear and cherished home for Valentin, now the Palacio has become the place for playing old films, its audiences mostly from poor masses who cannot afford expensive entertainment, its dark atmosphere coaxing lovers to yield to wild stirrings of passions and reckless abandon.

The sarsuwela swings the audience back and forth in time: It is 1896, and the Philippine revolution against Spain is about to explode. Valentin is the young resident pianist of the Palacio, and he falls in love with the beautiful Diding, a new talent under the clutches of Señor Alfonso, the director who promises instant fame to innocent women in exchange for sexual favors. He traps her to be his mistress as he is already married to Carlota (a former star on stage who in her unhappy state finds true love in the arms of another man, the soldier Deodato, who is ordered killed by Alfonso). Diding's heart remains with Valentin, with whom she bears a child. Señor Alfonso is alerted to the amorous goings-on as he is sterile and incapable of having a child with any woman. In a blind fit of passion, he shoots Diding and the child in her womb. Out of grief and rage against their death, Valentin joins the revolution, already sparked by the execution of the martyr-hero Jose Rizal in Bagumbayan. Valentin vows to kill Alfonso but the latter flees. Valentin buries the remains of Diding and their child right on the spot where the stage of the Palacio stands. Alfonso becomes an actor on screen, handsome and sought by women, and Valentin finds an opportunity to shoot him dead. The sarsuwela ends with Valentin and the young Toto, his aide in the grounds of the Palacio, to whom he reveals the story of his life. Japanese warplanes drop bombs on the place, setting it crumbling, chandeliers crushing on the floor, but the spirits of the lovers reunited in Heaven's gates.

What do we see in *Palasyo ni Valentin* that makes it so much a worthy sarsuwela as much as it is a modern play? Love's purity and pathos, a country's cry for dignity and peace, the paradox of beauty entwined with the brevity of a moment, music and metaphor in dramatic combination, and when all has come to pass, a soaring belief in the enduring power of a form that has withstood time, weariness, malice. Valentin's palace has crumbled but the ashes of lovers, their devotion, their music, linger on in the hearts of the crowd.

No end to the sarsuwela

Other recent sarsuwela worth mentioning are recent works by two National Artists of the Philippines: *Something to Crow About* (2006) by Alejandro Roces (based on his classic short story "My Brother Kiko's Peculiar Chicken") and *Hibik at Himagsik Nina Victoria Laktaw* by Bienvenido Lumbera. The first pokes fun at a man's

obsession with cockfighting and the cock he is proud to own; the second chronicles the struggle of the women during the Filipino-American War. Obviously the two differ in tone and theme, but like any sarsuwela at its best, they have regaled and touched audiences with their language and music and movement.

Thus we cannot begin to write off the sarsuwela in spite of doomsayers. Like all societies in the Asian region and in the other parts of the world, the sarsuwela or zarzuela as it is more known in other cultures, faces competition with all forms of media entertainment, not to mention the powerful influence of the computer, the Internet, and other incredible leaps in communication. We have seen the waning embers of the sarsuwela at various times in its odyssey, but to everyone's surprise and delight, the sarsuwela marches on. We wager that when it looks like it is dead and beaten, directors and playwrights like Tiongson and O'Hara, and a new generation of serious young artists, will find a way to breathe life into it anew, not with a trace of fatigue but excitement, not with defeat but with proud vigor. The story of the sarsuwela is as much the story of a nation that continues to struggle and prevail against oppressive governments and institutions, the music of hope against despairing times, some kind of vow that honors noble aspirations for the greater humanity over personal motives and ambitions. Sarsuwela is a movement not only on stage but across islands, and as long as people are hungry in body and soul, it will remain to stimulate our longing and memory and imagination for what should be—a world compassionate and charitable to all, just and respectful of freedoms and rights, singing words and melodies of constancy and faith as if it were the one and only way of life.

Endnotes

¹ Doreen G. Palabas Fernandez, *Essays on Philippine Theater History* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1996).

² *Ibid.*, p. 86.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁵ Jerry Respeto, *Ang Dramang Tagalog, 1899-1944: Isang Pag-aaral sa mga Anyo at Paksa. Kolehiyo ng Arte at Literatura* (Quezon City: UP Diliman, 1995), p. 53.

⁶ Doreen G. Palabas Fernandez, *Essays on Philippine Theater History*, p. 92.

⁷ Nicanor Tiongson, *What is Philippine Drama?* (Manila: Philippine Educational Theater Association Documentation Research & Publication Division, 1983), p. 103.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13