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Doreen G. Fernandez

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## **Pilipinas Circa 1907**

Review Author: Doreen G. Fernandez

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glimmering numeral, an imagination without an imagining self.

Telly perceives Sevi as he who joins the lives of the Gils *now*, "join" in the sense of "gather", the one awaited to give the Gils a cause—the Gils whose lives are Blank Books of Revelations, with human weakness and frail hearts.

*Awaiting Trespass* is all this—a *pasión*, a small book of hours, a book of numbers and a book of revelations. But it is also a compendium of all the things you have wanted to know but have been afraid to ask about the Republic of the Philippines under Imelda and Ferdinand Edralin Marcos.

*Francisco Arcellana*  
*Department of English*  
*University of the Philippines*

PILIPINAS CIRCA 1907. By Nicanor G. Tiongson. Quezon City: Philippine Educational Theater Association, 1985. 266 pages.

When the Spanish *zarzuela* was transplanted to the Philippines in the nineteenth century, it offered not only entertainment for the elite in cities like Manila and Iloilo, but also training in Western theatre of a realistic mode for a generation of actors, directors, producers, scene designers, composers and writers. By the first decade of the twentieth century, the form had taken root in the vernacular theatre, previously dominated by the *komedya* and religious theatre like the *sinakulo*.

In the different provinces and languages of Luzon and the Visayas, and eventually Mindanao, *sarsuwela* troupes indigenized the form, which crystallized into a musical comedy of manners that focused on domestic situations, folk foibles, and a romantic view of life and mores. Where theatrical presentations had always been a feature of religious festivals and fiestas, the *sarsuwela* provided a first taste of professional theatre, in that touring troupes came to be organized, staging plays for a fee, and stars like Atang de la Rama, "Queen of the Zarzuela," became the toast of the archipelago.

In the 1920s, however, faced by competition from vaudeville, the movies, and the new English-language "legitimate" theatre (product of the schools, which since 1901 had been using English as medium of instruction), the *sarsuwela* waned in the cities, surviving mainly in the provinces far from the electronic media. It took the sixties, with student activism and the surge of nationalism, to bring about new interest in the form. In a search for national identity, attention focused on various aspects of indigenous art and culture, and drew *sarsuwelas* out of trunks and memories and onto scholarly scrutiny and revivals. Eventually, new *sarzuelas* came to be written — Amelia Lapena Bonifacio's *Ang Bundok*, Bienvenido Lumbea's *Ang Palabas Bukas*, Isagani Cruz's *Halimaw* — which updated the form with current themes and

contemporary theatre styles.

One of the most successful of the new sarsuwelas, Nic Tiongson's *Pilipinas circa 1907* is set in the time of the sarsuwela heyday, and is based on Severino Reyes' 1905 play, *Filipinas para los Filipinos*. Where Reyes had based his central conflict on reactions to the Davis Bill prohibiting American women from marrying Filipino men, Tiongson focuses on imperialistic interests, asserting that both Filipinas (women) and Filipinas (the country) properly belong to Filipinos — thus playing on the words, enlarging the dimensions of theme, and putting the sarsuwela within the realm of theatre of social comment.

The new content develops actual historical data: the American attempt to monopolize the native tobacco industry, the clash between Federalistas and Nacionalistas, the change in values caused by the infusion of American education. All this is served up with traditional sarsuwela verve, enveloped in romance, lilting songs, "modern" dances like the foxtrot, and a chorus of pretty girls filling the stage and captivating the contemporary audience as the old sarsuwela used to.

Many of the traditional elements are there: the comic servant, for example, although this time Juan's provincial ways are a strength that keep him from being enticed by the blandishments of foreign culture:

JUAN: Bakit nga ba ang mga Filipino  
Nakatanghod sa Amerikano  
Naku, aywan ko nga ba sa inyo  
Bakit kayo napapaloko? (p. 46)

Pura and Andres are a couple in love in the old, shy courtly way:

PURA: Maaari kayang — dahil matagal na rin namang panahon  
tayong nagkakakilala — ay tawagin mo na lamang akong  
Pura, at tatawagin na lamang kitang Andres, pagkat ang  
mga katagang Mang at Aling ay palasak bilang katawagan  
sa mga nag-uusap at di magkakilala. . . (p. 61)

and Leonor and Emilia's *tampuhan* is poetic and straight out of a Juan Luna painting:

LEONOR: Emilio ay bakit ako ay hinubdan  
Ng tanging dahila't puno niyaring buhay  
Ngayon ay hiniya at sinentensiyahang  
Magpasan ng dusang walang katarungan.

EMILIO: Ang bawat luha mo na bumabalisbis  
At ang mga hikbi niyang abang dibdib  
Ay putong na tinik na pumipigipit  
Tumitimong subyang sa puso kong amis. (p. 56)

Yet Pura eventually follows Andres to the countryside, where he has joined the Filipino rebels against the U.S. insular government; and Emilio's imprisonment for a "seditious" poem causes Leonor to decide on a desperate course

of action that brings about the play's climax.

Señora Pilar and Don Pardo represent the *ilustrado* class, but where Pardo is eager to enter into profitable partnership with the American businessmen, Señora Pilar is firm in her nationalism, and eventually stands up to her brother in a way most Filipina women might not have done, in 1907.

What Tiongson has done, therefore, is to keep the manner and charm of the traditional sarsuwela, while loading it with contemporary perceptions and concern. The language he uses is Tagalog with a period flavor, yet it is sharply contemporary in thrust:

- PILAR:   Ano ang gagawin nitong makabayan,  
           Ngayong naninila agilang dayuhan,  
           Ano ang gagawin nitong sambayanan  
           Sa paninibasib niyong dahumpalay.
- EMILIO:  Di dapat matakot tayong Pilipino  
           Kapag naniniil kuhilang dayo,  
           Kung nasa katuwira'y taas yaring noo  
           Walang magagawa ang ganid na lobo. (p. 125)

The characters he etches are indeed zarzuela types — the shy Andres, the brave Emilio — poet, of course, like most sarsuwela heroes of old — the easily hurt Leonor, the arrogant Pardo — but are individualized enough to seem sensitively human. The lilting songs by Lutgardo Labad, Louie Pascasio, and Lucien Letaba, sound quite a bit like the sarsuwela songs that were the song hits of yesteryears, but are fresh, and bid fair to take their place beside today's ballads and love songs.

When the play opened in 1982, the enthusiastic response of the audience — both the old who remembered the sarsuwela and the young who were being introduced to it — proved that the theatrical formula of the twenties still had relevance and charm for the theatre-goer of the eighties.

The book represents a milestone in Philippine publishing. It includes the production script in Tagalog and in English translation, and the score for piano and voice, and thus provides an acting edition that should prove valuable to both local and foreign theatre troupes. In the introduction to the sarsuwela by the author, one of the country's foremost theatre scholars, and the notes from playwright, composers, director, and production designer, one has a kit for the theatre man, the scholar, and the interested reader — an introduction to both the form and the production. *Pilipinas circa 1907*, the play and the book, both open a window into the history of the sarsuwela, and into its future in contemporary Philippine theatre.

Doreen G. Fernandez  
 Department of English  
 Ateneo de Manila University