

# Contemporary theatre in the Philippines

## The actor in the identity shaping process

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The culture of the Philippines, an island country in the South-East Asia, represents a huge range of very outstanding and fascinating traditions. Nevertheless, for anyone who would like to discuss the issue of the Filipino contemporary theatre, the difficult and very complicated postcolonial history of the country appears as one of the main challenges. The Philippines were first colonized by Spain (1565-1898) and later (in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) by the USA. People in the Philippines used to say that they had spent 350 years in the convent and 50 years in Hollywood. But as long as we can speak about a strong influence, which both of those countries had on the Filipino nation and culture, we cannot forget that we can never speak about the entire removal of local traditions and aesthetics.

Most scholars (both in the Philippines and in foreign countries), who try to describe Philippine theatre, divide those dramas and performances into three groups: the indigenous theatre, the theatre based/founded on Spanish colonization, and the theatre influenced (in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) by the Americans.<sup>1</sup>

I would like to propose in this article a different perspective, a discussion on two kinds of Philippine theatre identities: the first one, the group identity (national, social, political etc.), and the second one, the individual identity (of one actor/one particular performance group), where all of those three kinds of theatre traditions exist. I do believe there is plenty of tensions between the group identity and the individual identity, and each must be seen as the important element of the second one.

This essay does not tend to be a brief introduction, a full guide through Filipino theatre traditions. It should be rather seen as another voice in a wide discussion about the state of contemporary theatre in the Philippines, the theatre of a country which shares with many others the experience of being postcolonial, but in the same time it keeps its uniqueness and must be considered under its own particular history.

However, it should be admitted that this research has been made by a Polish theatre

<sup>1</sup> It is very popular to write about “Spanish tradition” vs. “American influence”. This kind of division shows that even nowadays it is uneasy to clarify how the Philippine dependency on the USA in the 20<sup>th</sup> century should be seen, as it was rather a political and/or cultural influence or a hidden effective colonization.

scholar, who was raised up in a different social and cultural environment (not in the Philippines) and who tried to understand a different theatre reality and tradition, being always aware of her “alien” perspective.

Moreover, in this article the term “theatre” will not only refer to particular plays staged in official theatre buildings in the Philippines. I would rather prefer to speak about the “theatricality”, the notion of culture shown by the theatre pieces.

### 1. *What does it mean “the Filipino theatre”?*

One of the most difficult questions is how the “actor” is categorized and understood in the context of Philippine theatre. Considering the fact that the Philippine nation still needs to deal with its postcolonial identity, terms, such as “theatre” or “actor”, based on the Western cultural tradition, cannot be easily taken for granted.

In the postcolonial reality it is impossible to distinct the “original tradition” from the one “influenced” by foreign cultures. The postcoloniality might preconceive that particular tradition is a kind of amalgamation, where original roots have been changed and influenced under hundred years of foreign colonial rules. Then, after the process of decolonization, identity must be re-established and rebuilt on the new foundation, where even the most simple question, such as «what our past does contain?», may provoke particular problems.

James F. Kenny in *Tagalog Movies and Identity. Portrayals of the Filipino Self* focuses on the issue of Filipino identity in the context of the cinema. His article shows how the fact of being a postcolonial nation projects particular questions about the self-identity:

Filipino academics and critics often speak of the need to project Filipino values and culture in their popular media. They argue that it is the most popular of these media, television and the cinema, which have been most dominated by western produced programs and films and by locally produced imitations of these. However, in this post colonial climate most Filipinos’ sense of a “truly” Filipino self remains dubious at best and many have found the task of self-discovery elusive. The problem may indeed be that after four hundred years of domination the cultural conceptions and values of their former colonizers have become inextricably enmeshed in the national psyche. In a sense Philippine recorded history and nationhood began with its colonizers. This is not to say that a Filipino self does not exist or will not emerge as a mature, independent entity in the future, but only that its representations in the film medium must be viewed in light of its colonial past.<sup>2</sup>

We can find similar approaches when we try to speak about postcolonial Filipino theatre, where the inner negotiation of being a (post)colonial country is still viv-

<sup>2</sup> James K. Fenny, *Tagalog Movies and Identity. Portrayals of the Filipino Self*, «The Humanities Bulletin», 4, 1995, p. 108.

id. However, this kind of questioning the “postcolonial identity” assumes that the contemporary culture might be seen as the “authentic” one or, on the other hand, “polluted” by foreign influences.<sup>3</sup>

I personally believe, that any kind of “searching for the authenticity” is a very tricky attitude, especially in the postcolonial (and highly globalized) world, where many traditions interfere. To rise up a question, if something is “authentic” or “polluted”, is supposed to mean, that someone is able to set up the intransgressible features of a particular culture.

A good example of how the postcolonial “inheritance” affects today the culture of the Philippines can be found in the issue of *mestizo*. Anyone who lived (even for a short period of time) in the Philippines might have caught a glimpse of a particular tendency. Most of the famous Filipinos – especially actors who work in television productions (the “Pilipino stars”) – tend to have a particular appearance. What is the most coveted is the fair skin. On the market there is a whole range of cosmetic products – soaps, creams, make-up foundation – which make the skin brighter. However, the desire to look as *mestizo/mestiza* should be seen in the contemporary context rather than as a cultural tendency. A similar trend can be observed e.g. in Europe, even if Europeans behave in a quite opposite way, most of the people try to be as much suntanned as possible. Nevertheless, one should not forget that the roots of *mestizo* appearance are traced back to the Spanish colonial caste system, related to i.a. taxation purposes. Since the Philippines won the independence from Spain, all the citizens started to be called “Filipino”, and any racial differentiation became officially forbidden. What surprises even more, is the fact that we may find people, who think that their “*mestizo* look” can destine their artistic career per se.<sup>4</sup> Even though one would like to distinguish the original “Philippine-ness” or “Filipino self”, or to find out “the Filipino roots”, it should not be forgotten that every culture is shaped in a long-time process; it is not an artefact, a “monument” – once designed and set up – but it is always performed by a particular group of people, in an intensively changed and vivid process, very responsive to social, political and economic tensions.

The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (especially after the fall of Marcos government in 1986)<sup>5</sup> was the time when many Philippine scholars and artists started

<sup>3</sup> According to Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco, who quotes Nicanor G. Tiongson’s seminal essay *What is Philippine Drama?*, «polluted theories» were those ones which had influenced Filipino theatre during the Spanish and American colonization. For Tiongson those «polluted theories» should be avoided in the process of reconceptualization of the contemporary Filipino culture. Cf. Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco, *Situating Philippine Theatricality in Asia. A Critique on the Asian-ness/Philippine-ness of Philippine Theatre(s)*, «Jati: Journal of Southeast Asian Studies», 16, 2011, pp. 131-132.

<sup>4</sup> A good example in this case might be the discussion on many websites, e.g.: <http://ask.metafilter.com/145758/Can-I-really-become-famous-in-the-Philippines>, accessed on 25.10.2013.

<sup>5</sup> Ferdinand Marcos was the President of the Philippines (1965-1986). He was famous for his anti-Japa-

to ask about their national identity. After several centuries of being dominated and ruled by Spanish, and later American colonizers, who not only tried to set up their own religion as the major one (with Spain Catholicism, with the USA mostly Protestantism),<sup>6</sup> or some forms of culture expressions (e.g. Spain introduced theatre forms like i.a. *sarsuela*, the USA actors' style mostly shaped in Hollywood), but first of all: the language and the educational system. That is why there is no simple answer for the question if the Philippine culture should be seen more as the "Asian" or more as the "Western" one.

Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco's article *Situating Philippine Theatricality in Asia. A Critique on the Asian-ness/Philippine-ness of Philippine Theatre(s)* is, in my personal opinion, one of the most important voices in the contemporary discussion about the identity of Filipino theatre. Tiatco shows that the binary system – Asian vs. Western tradition – is a *cul-de-sac* for anyone, who would like to analyse and make a research on the theatre tradition in the Philippines. If one considers Filipino theatre as the "Asian", he/she assumes that "Asian culture" is a homogenized, essential form, that culture of e.g. the Philippines and Iraq belongs to the same aesthetic system. According to Tiatco:

the theoretical discourse must not be based on a construction of a Philippine theatre identity or the reconstruction of a Philippine theatre identity but on the affirmation of Philippine theatre identities. As language appears to be political, "Theatres in Asia" I guess is more apt in the nature of this discourse or the "theatres in the Philippines" in the case of the Philippines.<sup>7</sup>

Personally I believe that the plural form, proposed in *Situating Philippine Theatricality in Asia. A Critique on the Asian-ness/Philippine-ness of Philippine Theatre(s)*, sheds new light on the issue of Filipino postcolonial identity. The fact of being colonized in the past cannot be seen as the reason to perceive the country's culture a less "Filipino" nowadays. The requirement of being – so called *authentic* and *pure* (in this meaning to choose the "Philippine-ness" instead of the "Philippine-nesses") – occludes the artistic freedom of self-expression and the independence of a particular artist.

nese guerrilla activity during WWII, his presidency became one of the hardest time for the Philippines. Marcos was strongly supported by American government, but in the same time within twenty-three years he created his own regime. In 1986 the Philippines' external debt exceeded \$28.3 billion and in the same time the country was strongly corrupted. Marcos was also involved in the murder of his opposition leader, Benigno Aquino. In February 1986 Marcos and his wife, Imelda Marcos, had to escape to Hawaii (with American support).

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Kenton J. Clymer, *Protestant Missionaries in the Philippines, 1898-1916. An Inquiry into the American Colonial Mentality*, Urbana, Chicago 1986.

<sup>7</sup> Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco, *Situating Philippine Theatricality...* cit. p. 142.

2. *Sacral performances and the question of the performer's individualism*

In the Philippines one may find a long and very diverse tradition of cultivating sacral performances. Especially Christmas and the Holy Week, of course for the Christian communities,<sup>8</sup> is the most important time within the year, when the majority of inhabitants of particular *barangay*<sup>9</sup> or town work together to cultivate special, religious and sacral dedicated, theatre forms.

However, theatre forms like the Passion play re-enactment, or the *pabasa* (reading/chanting of the Passion) might be considered as the “inheritance” of Spanish colonization, we should not forget about its *postcolonial* identity, so also its inner diversity and the tension of the “Philippine-nesses” included.

In my personal opinion, one of the most important foundation for Filipino society is the need for solidarity and cooperation in micro and macro-communities. The role of the family, as well as any other kind of community, is visible both in everyday life and in any sort of extraordinary celebration. Of course, I do not claim that in Filipino society there is no space left for individualism, but in this case, I would like to emphasize the importance of the community notion.

Besides many other reasons, those who prepare and who participate in sacral performances try to express their religious commitment and to follow the tradition, which bond together a particular community. As long as one of the main features of the tradition is its inner resistance for too precipitate changes, it stays alive only when it responds to the present reality. In this meaning, sacral performances have been constantly changing and their display has been always negotiated within the community.

I would like to describe also two examples of Filipino sacral performances, (both of them can be considered as postcolonial, as a result of Spanish Christianisation),<sup>10</sup> where the individual identity of the performer/actor struggles with the group identity. But before I elaborate this issue, it must be underlined that, although particular items (costumes, a light-set, often a scenery) used in sacral performances refer to the theatre tradition, we should be aware, that the “doer”/“performer”<sup>11</sup> cannot be easily considered just as the theatre “actor”. Sacral performances refer to religious rituals and the religious vow, to the sacral

<sup>8</sup> I decided to focus mostly on Catholic sacral performances, because of my personal experience, acquired during the theatre research conducted in the Philippines. Nevertheless, one should be aware, that the Philippines cannot be considered only as a Catholic country. There is a whole range of many other sacral performances, cultivated in non-Catholic Filipino communities, which might be as well described in the context of the tension between individual and group identities. However, I made the decision to focus on those examples, which I had a chance to observe while my staying in the Philippines.

<sup>9</sup> *Barangay* is a district or a village, the smallest administrative division.

<sup>10</sup> I had the chance to participate in both of them during the Holy Week in 2009 and 2011.

<sup>11</sup> In this context the term “performer” or “doer” should be understood in the meaning proposed e.g. by Jerzy Grotowski.

sphere of “communication” with God. The theatre settings should be rather seen as the medium, the tool to express the religious involvement of a particular person or the whole community.

The Catholic ritual of *pabasa* is the chanting/reading of life, passion, death and resurrection of Christ, which take place during the Holy Week.<sup>12</sup> Most of the time it is organised by local religious organizations, performed either by two chanters or two groups of chanters. As long as it is assumed as a group activity, it should be considered by every member as his/her personal vow. Even though it is an activity of the whole community, in some cases we can find out that it turns into a kind of competition for the performers. Each performer tries to create a piece of art, not only for God, but also for the whole community.

Moreover, especially in recent years, people try to change the old tradition and to make it more suitable for the younger generation. One of the most curious examples is the rap version of performing the *pabasa*.<sup>13</sup>

Another case is the *sinakulo* (named also *cenakulo* or *senákulo*), a Filipino traditional Passion play, performed in the majority of Catholic communities during the *Semana Santa* (the Holy Week). In 1955, in San Fernando Cutud (Pampanga province), Ricardo Navarro (often called also Tatang Temyong) wrote his own version of the Passion play, *Via Crucis o Passion y Muerte*. This drama became for the local community a foundation for a performance, in which one can participate also today. However, in 1961 Navarro decided to intensify his *panata* (the religious vow) by performing during the *sinakulo* the self-flagellation (*pamagdarame*). The following year, Tatang Temyong became the first Filipino who crucified himself and in the next decades he has found many followers. On every Good Friday this little town in Pampanga is crowded by people (Filipinos, as well as foreign tourists) who would like to participate in (or just watch) the performance of the self-flagellators, *sinakulo*, and people being crucified in *Kalbaryo*.<sup>14</sup>

The decision to deepen the religious vow may be considered as the transgression of the tradition. The personal choice of Ricardo Navarro, however negotiated within the community, has completely changed the way of thinking how the Good Friday is supposed to be celebrated.

<sup>12</sup> In every region it may be performed on a different day during *Semana Santa*.

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/inquirerheadlines/nation/view/20090407-198285/Pabasa-is-for-meditating-not-loud-wailing>, accessed on 02.11.2013.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco, Amihan Bonifacio-Ramolete, *Cutud's Ritual of Nailing on the Cross: Performance of Pain and Suffering*, «Asian Theatre Journal», 3, 2008, pp. 58-76; Nicholas H. Barker, *The Revival of Ritual Self-Flagellation and the Birth of Crucifixion in Lowland Christian Philippines*, Nagoya University, Nagoya 1998.

### 3. *Social and political commitment*

The 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Philippines has been strongly marked by political events. It was the time of the fight for national independence and in the same way the beginning of contemporary discussion on postcolonial Filipino identity. The fight did not only concern the decolonization process (from Spain and later from USA), but also more domestic problems, e.g. how the country and the nation should be led after the overthrow of Marcos' rule.

Among many other scholars, Pamela Del Rosario Castrillo points out that the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century for the Filipino culture was the time of being strongly inspired by the theatre tradition of Bertold Brecht (and his concept of *Lehrstücke*) and Augusto Boal (*Theatre of the Oppressed*). However, the biggest input, I would argue, should be rather seen in the intellectual inspiration, in the new way of thinking about theatre as an important tool in the fight for political and social changes.

In my personal opinion, the most significant changes should not be easily considered just as a result of staging particular plays e.g. of Brecht (Philippine Educational Theater Association's translations of *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *The Life of Galileo*), but rather as the effect of a long-time process of adaptation, reinterpretation and application of foreign theatre concepts in the field of a local theatre. According to Pamela Del Rosario Castrillo:

the multidimensional language of the theater is used [in the 1960s] to improvise oppressive situations they find themselves in and search for alternatives. This way, they become aware of the manifestations of an unjust social order and are able to articulate a longing for justice and faith in change. Theater then serves as a creative platform of social issues and a harbinger of hope.<sup>15</sup>

But if the main reason to create a political theatre is the social change, is there any space left for the actor to focus on his/her own identity? That means, what is more important in the political theatre, the individual or the group identity?

I do not assume, that in the theatre practice, which tends to be political, revolutionary and calling for social and/or governmental changes there is no space left for the individual identity of a particular actor, director or playwright. Names like Aurelio Tolentino, Juan Abad or Juan Matapang Cruz (well-known playwrights, who created at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the time of the fight against Spanish and later American oppression)<sup>16</sup> are not to be ever forgotten.

But of course Filipino political theatre did not end up by the time of the "seditious

<sup>15</sup> Pamela Del Rosario Castrillo, *Philippine Political Theater: 1946-1985*, «Philippine Studies», 4 1994, p. 532.

<sup>16</sup> However, we should consider the fact that also within three years of Japanese occupation (1942-1945) there was plenty of Filipino theatre plays, which became a significant voice against the political oppression of Japan.

plays”.<sup>17</sup> As I mentioned above, the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and the fight for full independence and democracy) should be also seen as a very crucial moment. The 1960s – or especially the “Theater of Social Concern” (1965-1968) according to Del Rosario Castrillo<sup>18</sup> – became a crucial moment for those theatre practitioners who questioned themselves about their own goal in the fight for real social and political change:

Counter cultural dependence, theater content, style and purpose changed. Poverty, injustice, oppression, graft and corruption became common themes during this period. Plays featured the labourer and farmer, slum dweller and scavenger using social realism, i.e., the mode that utilizes theater as a lecture platform for purposes of mass education.<sup>19</sup>

Even “simple” things as deciding if a particular play should be staged in English or in Tagalog, Cebuano or Ilocano became meaningful.<sup>20</sup> It is worth pointing this out, that this kind of decision is constantly undertaken even today. English language has not been seen any more as the definitive choice for Filipino theatre makers as it was before.

In the context of questioning the national self-identity, as well as about the tension between the individual and the group artistic identity, Cecile Guidote-Alvarez, the Filipino “culture caregiver”, might be a good example. In 1967 this young Filipino woman, who studied in the USA, came back to her country and created one of the most significant Filipino theatre group ever. The Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) became:

an organization of creative and critical artist-teacher-cultural workers committed to artistic excellence and a people’s culture that fosters both personal fulfilment and social transformation. It roots its foundation in the use of theater that is distinctly Filipino as a tool for social change and development. The company has lived by this principle as it continues to evolve with the changes that have occurred within and around it. It continues to push for first-rate quality theater while never taking for granted that the art it produces and teaches always serves a greater purpose.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> The term has been used by American colonial power authorities. It referred to the revolutionary character of dramas and plays staged by Filipinos in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Cfr. Pamela Del Rosario Castrillo, *Philippine Political Theater...* cit., p. 528.

<sup>18</sup> The term was used by Pamela Del Rosario Castrillo to describe the Filipino theatre movement and the plays staged in 1965-1968.

<sup>19</sup> Pamela Del Rosario Castrillo, *Philippine Political Theater...* cit., p. 530.

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. Maria Luisa F. Torres, *Brecht and the Philippines: anticipating freedom in theater*, in John Fuegi (ed.), *Brecht in Asia and Africa*, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong 1989, pp. 134-154.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. <http://petatheater.com/about-peta/>, accessed on 28.10.2013.

This group, and its social and political concern, did not end up with i.e. the fall of Marcos government. Until now, PETA has created ca. 400 performances, made by hundreds of the most important Filipino actors and directors. Nowadays PETA leads several theatre educational programs (i.a. The School of People's Theater), trains young people (PETA Metropolitan Teen Theater League Program, Children's Theater Program, Arts Zone Project) and first of all, its performing arm – the Kalinangan Ensemble – regularly stages plays in the PETA Theater Center in Quezon City.<sup>22</sup>

However, the PETA's educational impact in contemporary Filipino culture is incontrovertible, in the context of this particular article the question of the individual identity of those artists, who created their performances in Dulaang Rajah Sulayman, or later in the PETA Theater Center,<sup>23</sup> should be risen up. PETA has always been concerned rather as a theatre group than a constellation of Filipino stars. For all of those artists, who worked together in those hundreds of performances, the common aim was to achieve social and/or political changes. Even if we would like to point out particular actors or directors, PETA's activity will be always seen as the group cooperation.

The social and political commitment requires from artists to focus rather on the collaborative goal, and to shape together the group identity, then to centre upon his/her own shine.

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. <http://petatheater.com/about-peta/>, accessed on 30.10.2013.

<sup>23</sup> Rajah Sulayman was the open theatre in the ruins in the Fort Santiago in Intramuros, Metro Manila (in the past Spanish military barracks). In 2005 PETA has moved into its new building, PETA Theater Center, located in Quezon City, Metro Manila.