

STORMING THE HEAVENS, CONFRONTING THE HEATHENS: FROM THE PROPHETIC LANDSCAPE OF THE THEATRE STAGES ACROSS MINDANAO¹

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Just before martial rule was declared in September 1972, a nascent Mindanao Theatre movement interfaced with the social activism that arose in the late 1960s. There was a strong push towards creative methods and approaches to evangelization. A number of church pastoral workers who have had some exposure to theatre and the arts began to explore this creative field, with the assistance of the Philippine Educational Theatre Association (PETA). The imposition of martial rule changed the whole landscape of protest and resistance. The only institution which could dare to resist the dictatorship was the Church. Even at the risk of being arrested, tortured, and imprisoned, a growing number of church pastoral workers continued to mount theatrical pieces that were prophetic in denouncing the evils that came with the military dictatorship. To minimize outright military harassment, the church-based theatre groups interfaced their theatrical productions with “religious themes.” In these productions, theology and art converged. The actors stormed the heavens, invoking God’s intervention in the midst of severe injustice and oppression. They confronted the “heathens” of martial rule from the privileged postures of contemporary prophets. Even after martial rule, this theatre movement has persisted. This article attempts a theological reading of such a movement.

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INTRODUCTION

Just before martial rule was declared in September 1972, there arose a nascent Mindanao Theatre movement which had organic links with the militant one evolving nationally led by those based in Metro Manila.² This interfaced with the social activism that arose in the late 1960s owing to the strong conscientization-organization programs among peasants, agricultural workers, and the youth undertaken by groups such as the Federation of Free Farmers, the cooperatives movement, the Khi Rho, and other militant youth groups (including *Kabataang Makabayan*). Impacted by the ‘aggiornamento’ that arose out of Vatican II, various local churches across Mindanao - which were active partners of FFF and the Khi Rho - a growing number of priests, religious, BCC lay leaders, and young people were drawn into a militant involvement in engaging the social issues confronting them.³ The popularization of the early

2. See Pamila del Rosario-Castrillo, “The Theatre of Karl Gaspar: the Biblical-Religious Plays”, *Philippine Studies*, Vol. 45 (353-384), “The Theatre of Karl Gaspar: The Social Plays” *Philippine Studies*, Vol. 45 (174-196), “Karl Gaspar and the Mindanao Theatre 1970-1990”, *Philippine Studies*, Vol. 44 (39-51); “Conscientization, Struggle and Liberation: The theatre of Karl Gaspar”, M.A. Thesis, Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1993; Carlos Gaspar, Jehovenn Honculada, Wilfredo Rodriguez, Victorino Carillo, Jackie Schramm, and Fe Remotigue. *Mamugnaong Dula (Creative Dramatics) Trainors’ Manual* (Davao City: Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference, n.d.); Nestor Horfilla, *Kasaysayan sa Katilinghanong Teatro sa Mindanao. Kabilin* Monograph, Series 1, no. 1; KAFI (Kulturang Atin Foundation, Inc.) 1983. *Community Theatre, The Mindanao Experience* (Davao City: KAFI, n.d.); MCTN (Mindanao Community Theatre Network), “Our people, Our Struggle, Our Theatre, *MIPC Communications* 48 (25-26); Frank Rivera, Arthur Casanova, Edgarito Riconalla, Cecile Mambuay, Betty Nery, et al, Sining Kambayoka Seminar-Workshop Syllabus, *Kasaysayan at Pag-unlad ng Dulaang Pilipino* (Quezon City: Rex Book Store, 1982); and Laura Samson, L., Brenda V. Fajardo, Cecilia B. Garrucho, Lutgardo L. Labad, Ma. Gloriosa Santos-Cabangon, *A Continuing Narrative on Philippine theatre: The Story of PETA* (Quezon City: PETA, 2008).

3. Warren Kinne, *The Splintered Staff, Structural Deadlock in the Mindanao Church* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1900); Karl Gaspar, “A People’s Theatre: The Growth and Development of Creative Dramatics”, *Readings on Contemporary Mindanao Church Realities* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1994); and “Using Theatre for a Dialogical Process in Education Programs” *Pastoral Skills Manual for BCC Workers*, (Quezon City: SPI Publications, 1988).

articulation of liberation theology and the theory of Paulo Freire - as articulated in the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* - helped to reinforce such commitments.⁴

Since this was a period of organizing work among both in- and out-of-school youth, youth activism expanded both in the urban and rural areas of Mindanao. One of the most popular forms of reaching out to the youth was through theatre. As Manila-based youth groups had provided the early models for theatrical productions - what would be referred to as agit-prop plays which were short ones integrating militant songs and the *dula-tula* (choral recitations) form which had minimum production design elements - it was easy to have these appropriated in other parts of the country. Rallies and demonstrations were incomplete without this guerrilla-type of theatrical improvisations.

Among the radical church circles, it was a period when there was a strong push towards creative methods and approaches to evangelization. A number of church pastoral workers who had some exposure to theatre and the arts - especially, Fr. Rudolfo "Dong" Galenzoga - began to explore this creative field.⁵ In his early dance theatre productions, he tapped his parishioners in Kolabugan, Lanao del Norte. Later on, with the assistance of the Philippine Educational Theatre Association (PETA) who wanted to expand from Manila to Mindanao, this creative experimentation expanded.⁶

Then martial rule changed the whole landscape of protest and resistance. The only institution that could dare openly to resist the dictatorship was the Church. Even as the risk of being arrested, tortured and imprisoned remained, a growing number of church pastoral workers continued to mount theatrical pieces that were prophetic in terms of the denunciations of the evil that came with the military dictatorship covering issues such as human rights violations, development incursions into the countryside that dislocated indigenous and lowland-peasant communities, worsening poverty

4. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1993).

5. Flor Temple, "The study of Kolabugan dance theatre" (Quezon City: M. A. Thesis submitted to Ateneo de Manila University, 1980).

6. Samson et al, *A Continuing Narrative on Philippine theatre: The Story of PETA*.

and the like. To try to minimize outright military harassment, the church-based theatre groups interfaced their theatrical productions with religious themes that could easily be highlighted if such productions were mounted during liturgical seasons such as Christmas, Lent, and the feasts of the patron saints. Cloaked within such religious images and symbols, such theatrical productions could still be mounted - especially inside churches, chapels, and Catholic schools - to minimize the risk of military raids. But the prophetic messages were not compromised.

From out of this scenario, theology and art converged. Productions went from morality plays to Passion plays. As priests, catechists, theologians, and artists converged - many of whom were young people - in collaborative artistic endeavours, the field became a very dynamic landscape for theologizing. Some of the best examples that arose out of this period were those mounted by Fr. Galenzoga who did *Maranatha*, the allegorical play that dealt with militarization in Mindanao and the ensuing human rights violations among the poor and oppressed. Across Mindanao there arose a network of church workers who were trained under the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference Secretariat's Creative Dramatics Program. They mounted all kinds of plays to conscientize their audience to the evils of martial rule.⁷

Such productions stormed the heavens in terms of invoking God's intervention in the midst of severe injustice and oppression. They also confronted the "heathens"⁸ of martial rule from the

7. Karl Gaspar, "A Study of the Genealogical Roots of Mindanao Theatre Artists and Cultural Workers," A Paper Presented to the *Tanghal'*Theatre Research Project Conference, Xavier University, 11 December 2009.

8. In this essay I go beyond the usual definition of the word 'heathen'. In most dictionaries, a heathen is defined as: 1) an unconverted individual of a people that do not acknowledge the God of the Bible; a person who is neither a Jew, Christian, nor Muslim; a pagan 2) an irreligious, uncultured and uncivilized person. See for example: <http://dictionary.reference.com/> accessed 14 September 2011. In this essay, I go beyond the No. 1 definition, namely a heathen also include a baptized Catholic but has not accepted the God as preached by Jesus Christ, namely a God who champions justice and is on the side of the poor. In this context, the heathen is one who arrests innocent civilian, engages in torture and extra-judicial killings while amassing wealth through corruption and other evil ways. During martial rule they certainly included those of the conjugal dictatorship, their cronies and the top echelon of the military-police structure. For all the evils

privileged postures of contemporary prophets including grassroots peasants who were empowering themselves within their *Gagmayng Kristobanong Katilingban* (Basic Christian Communities). Such were the human actions arising out of a Local Church that took seriously the Gospel. But as “all human action has a function of performance”⁹ it becomes even more meaningful to deal with stage performances as human action that had a role to play in manifesting God’s intervention in history.

MY OWN THEATRICAL ENGAGEMENTS JUST BEFORE AND DURING MARTIAL RULE

I had some experiences in mounting plays when I was in high school and college so it seemed natural that I would cross path with the Philippine Educational Theatre Association (PETA) later on.¹⁰ Having seen some of PETA’s socially-oriented productions in the late 60s and early 70s as well as exposed to street theatre that were in vogue in Manila during the period just before martial law, I saw the power of theatre in politicizing the people into engaging in social protest.¹¹ So when I found myself teaching at Holy Cross College of Digos (now the Cor Jesu College) and being asked to be the adviser of the school’s Socio-Economics Society, I introduced my students to militant theatre.

During that schoolyear of June 1971-March 1972 our theatre group – *Mga Magdudulang Mayukmok* (The Theatre of the Anawim)

they inflicted on innocent civilians especially the poor and powerless and for completely ignoring the needs of the most abandoned, these people were heathens. And appropriating definition No. 2, they were certainly uncivilized if to be civilized means to do what is just, to be kind and considerate to others and to be compassionate to the most needy. Beyond martial rule, there still are those of the elite in Philippine society that have perpetuated evil acts committed against the poor and powerless.

9. Raymund Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation: Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Redemption* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 224.

10. In the summer of 1970, the Social Action Center of the Diocese of Tagum invited PETA’s main staff persons – including Cecile Guidote, Lino Brocka, Lorlie Villanueva et al – to conduct a 5-day Creative Dramatics Workshop in Tagum. I was one of close to a hundred participants of this workshop. I was invited to join by Remy Ignacio-Rikken who organized the workshop.

11. Karl Gaspar, *The Masses are Messiah: Contemplating the Filipino Soul* (Quezon City: Institute of Spirituality in Asia, 2010), 384-5.

– mounted two agit-prop plays: *Unsay Kangmaon sa Atong Nasud, Manang Takya?* (What is the Future of our Country, Aling Takya?) and *Kuskos Balungos: Nganong Ang Nasud Nag-antus: Ambot sa Langan, Pilay Edad sa Ok-ok?* (Why is the Country Suffering: I don't know with the fly, how old is the cockroach?).¹² We toured these two plays across the Davao Region and mounted them during the FFF rallies, demonstrations organized by student activists and school symposia. We also mounted a zarzuela that protested the coming in of sugar plantations to Davao del Sur; it was titled *Ang Ngotngot nga Kangitngit* (The Painful Darkness).

A year later I changed location as I wanted to be more immersed among the poor. I worked in the parish of Mati and there set up another *Magdudulang Mayukmok* group composed of both in- and out-of-school youth, market vendors, teachers, and the unemployed. We remounted the agit-prop plays. In one performance just a few days before martial law was declared, a local squad of the Philippine Constabulary (PC) attempted to stop us from mounting the play. Consequently, when martial law was declared, the same squad raided our house and arrested us. That was the end of those kinds of plays for a while.

As martial rule persisted for a while, those of us who sustained our theatre engagements had to shift gear and find more creative ways of staging plays without being arrested on the spot given that media censorship intensified and the space to raise a voice of protest got narrower. It is interesting that as I shifted into this terrain, as a theatre practitioner I found myself interfacing with the Bible and theology. I present three particular experiences here.

FIRST EXPERIENCE: THE MORALITY PLAY

Bruised by the first encounter with the whack of the martial rule stick, our theatre group got disbanded and we went our separate ways to protect each other. But youth idealism, the boredom of life in a small town controlled by the State's military and the support

12. Full text of the play is in Arthur Casanova, ed., *Mga Piling Dulang Mindanao* (Manila: UST Publishing House, 2008), 199-214.

of the BCCs conspired to make us ask the question: is there really no way that theatre can be mounted during martial rule? The collective answer was NO, so by Christmas time we were back on stage. Except that we used the church sanctuary as our theatrical stage as this was the space that the military would not dare cross. And it was a simple Christmas pageant with the Holy Family, angels, shepherds and the Three Kings. It all seemed very safe; there was nothing subversive about such a play.

Having regained our bearing and our confidence, we then asked what sort of play would not be considered subversive and yet could impart lessons to a people under the yoke of authoritarian rule. The idea of a morality play – that goes back to the European middle ages - was suggested and we came up with a play that paralleled *Everyman*.¹³ The play was entitled – *Ang Hukmanan sa Katapusan* (The Court of Last Judgment) and it was inspired by Matthew 25: 31-46.¹⁴ The play's characters include Nos. 1, 2, and 3 (the Trinity) and Hand, Feet, Mouth, Ear, and Heart. Each one except Heart failed to respond to Jesus' exhortations.

Hand is the character who amassed wealth at the expense of the poor and does not share food with others (highlighting the evil of feudal land ownership in the country). Feet is the authoritarian ruler who steps on the rights of others and refuses to give water to political prisoners (highlighting the evil of martial rule). Mouth is the one who does not speak the truth and is guilty of telling all kinds of lies including perpetuating the myths of the lack of housing for the poor (highlighting censorship during martial rule). Ear is the one who refuses to listen to the cry of the poor including those who are

13. 'Everyman' is the popular title of the play known originally as *The Somonyng (Summoning) of Everyman*. It is an English morality play that arose in the 15th century. Its technique is the use of allegorical characters who represent the two sides of reality – good and evil. Naturally, its premise is that good will triumph in the end as God will be on the side of those who do good. See Martin Banham, *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). A Tagalog adaptation of the play was mounted by PETA in the 1970s.

14. Full text of the play is in Athur Casanova, *Mga Piling Dulang Mindanao, Unang Aklat* (Manila: UST Publishing House, 2007), 235-274 and Karl Gaspar, ed. *Mga Giya sa Kasaulogan sa BEC GKK*, (Iligan City: Redemptorist Itinerant Mission Team Publications, 1994).

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sick and in prison (highlighting apathy and indifference in society). Heart relates to the temptations of carnal desires and sins of the flesh but in the end is the only character who is able to redeem herself as she embraces compassion for the weak and marginalized.

Hukmanan became a popular play for community theatre groups across Mindanao as it is easy to mount. It is a short one-act play that lasts for 40 minutes. Only eight actors are needed as it involved only eight characters; there was no need for elaborate costume, lighting, make-up and props. It is a mobile play that could be staged anywhere. And it had a lot of comic dialogue that made the audience laugh. It has been mounted as part of a ritual for community penance. It can be incorporated in a Bible seminar or during the November 1 and 2 celebrations. With its success, we mounted other morality plays including *Ang Kapunongan sa mga Pangulo sa Kadautan sa Kalibutan* (The Association of the Evil Leaders in the World).¹⁵

SECOND EXPERIENCE: THE CONSCIENTIZING PLAY

During martial rule, it was the Church's Social Action Centers (SAC) which were under the constant surveillance of the military. One of these was the SAC of the Diocese of Tagum which in the 1960s-70s was one of the most active in terms of organizing the basic sectors. In 1976, its offices were raided and more than ten of its staff members were hauled to prison to languish in jail for months. This raid led to the arrests of more people working among church programs in Davao City. I wrote about these incidents and how it inspired the mounting of another type of prophetic theatrical production which incorporated elements of the theatre of Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal:¹⁶

15. Full text of the play is in Pamela Castrillo, Don Pagusara and Macario Tiu, *Philippine Literature: A Mindanao Reader* (Davao City: Ateneo de Davao Research and Publication Office, 2005), 191-204. John Willett (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1979) and Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, translated by Charles A. and Maria Odilia Leah McBride (London: Pluto Press, 1979).

16. See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an aesthetic*, translated and notes by John Willett (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1979) and Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, translated by Charles A. and Maria Odilia Leah McBride (London: Pluto Press, 1979).

In 1976 – as the dictatorial State turned mad – a massive wave of arrests led to the imprisonment of close to a hundred church workers in Davao. This came as a result of Lilia Judilla’s “confession” while in military custody. Lilia was a former church worker in the Diocese of Tagum. In her signed affidavit, she named those who were arrested as part of the underground revolutionary movement against Marcos.

From detainees’ testimonies smuggled out of prison, we heard that some who were arrested were tortured. A number languished in prison for months. Since I knew most of them, I was very much affected by this.

Weeks after the arrests, we felt we had to do something on the detainees’ behalf. Those who could exerted pressure on the military for their release. We launched information campaigns to conscientize more people in Davao regarding human rights violations. We also reached out to church people exhorting them to read the signs of the times and to resist State violence.

Since theatre was one of my main engagements at the time, I wrote a musical play entitled *Katakomba*. The play juxtaposed the experiences of the early Christians in Rome who were arrested en masse, imprisoned, and fed to the lions with the contemporary experiences of Christians arrested by the Marcos dictatorship.

The play proved to be cathartic for all of us. Since many church people were faced with the same reality, the play was staged by a number of parish groups throughout Mindanao. *Katakomba* proved to be a watershed event in the history of the Mindanao Church during the early years of martial law. The use of theatre for conscientization was just one of the exciting aspects of a church that was coming of age.... (W)hile the Vatican II documents provided the initial inspiration (for us to be more involved in conscientizing work), it was Marcos who ironically pushed the Mindanao Church to get in touch with its roots in the life and witness of Jesus and the early Christian communities.

In a curious parallel, Marcos exhibited the characteristics of biblical figures who oppressed God’s people from the Pharaoh to Herod (who also happened to have a scheming wife). Enthroned in a position of absolute power, Marcos and his cronies used their privileged state positions to amass wealth, distribute the largesse to friends and relatives, and armed the

military to protect them. In the process, he used the military to neutralize his enemies, leading to massive human rights violations.

This state of affairs paralleled the context of the Gospel of Mark the Evangelist. Where it took shape within the context of a need for prophecy, following the Jesus model, so also did the “Gospel of Mindanao” circa 1970s to 1980s...

The memories, however, remain vivid ... There was a high level of unity and collaboration. There was a passion in the announcing of the Good News and the denouncing of evil ways. There were many explosions of creativity from liturgy to theologizing processes. Creative dramatics seminars were held in parishes to enable creative inculturation of liturgical celebrations. Pastoral workers and youth leaders were taught the elements and techniques of theatre, choreography, and visual arts. Soon there were dramatic improvisations, choral presentations, and stylized dancing in liturgical celebrations in churches, especially during the Holy Week, Christmas and others. Theological reflections were also enriched by a thrust toward being grounded in indigenous belief systems. There was a greater appreciation of the richness of indigenous cultures; the urgency of ecological concerns also led to fresh theological insights. Grassroots theologizing became more pervasive.¹⁷

THIRD EXPERIENCE: THE PASSION PLAY

I had prison experiences in 1972 and 1974 but these involved short periods of time. It was in 1983-85, when the prison experience was longer. As have been the experiences of other prisoners from Paul of Tarsus to Bonhoeffer, Gramsci to Rizal, incarceration for political detainees can lead to interesting experiences behind bars. I've mounted a number of Passion Plays through the years but the one that remains special in my memory is what we mounted in the Davao Metrodiscom Prison in the Holy Week of 1974. Here is where this play production can genealogically trace its inspiration

17. Karl Gaspar, *To be Poor and Obscure* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2004), 96-99.

back to *Pasyon and Revolution*.¹⁸ I wrote the following in my prison journal:

This year ('84) we decided to celebrate the Holy Week liturgy creatively. Such celebrations had been denied us in prison; liturgies had become lifeless and spiritless. With Holy Week approaching, we felt it was time to overcome the paralysis of fear and act with some prophetic courage. We also thought that we had to free ourselves from a self-censorship that was becoming more oppressive and far-reaching than the official censorship of the military.

We approached the Commanding Officer (CO) and a minor miracle happened. Our request to prepare the Lenten liturgical celebrations, including a Passion play, was granted including permission for two hours' rehearsal daily for ten days....

Passion plays and liturgical celebrations have become part of our religio-cultural legacy. Most are staged in the traditional style complete with Roman soldiers and the costumes of the time.. As detainees, we were naturally drawn to a more contemporary presentation which would portray the suffering, agonizing Christ within the context of present-day agony, suffering and torture. We also wanted our liturgy to echo what is in the people today – their aspirations for justice and peace, their outrage at the violations of human rights and their commitment to struggle for freedom. How could we meet the expectations of the CO and our own? How could we avoid a clash which would be both controversial as well as explosive? We finally came up with a musical play which would tone down the anger and outrage, and we devised the strategy of a play within a play so that the character who portrays Jesus is also a labor organizer in 1984. We decided to cut down on the clenched fists ... and we simplified and de-emphasized certain scenes so the picket lines didn't have as much fire as real strikes had.

Rehearsing under the gaze of the military in the guardhouse was, in a way, a blessing as we could tell from their faces when we were going beyond their limits. In the end we struck a fairly good balance because the play remained powerful and acceptable

18. Rey Iletto, *Pasyon and Revolution, Popular Movements in the Philippines 1840-1910* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979).

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as indicated by feedback from the sympathetic military guards. The military detainees themselves couldn't understand why we were given the CO's permission for they claim our plays are always "subversive." However, they are the first to reason out that, since we are already in prison, we could not be arrested anymore?

CASTING was easy as we only needed a cast of twenty-five and our "population" of seventy five included many talented detainees. In Renato, we had a perfect choice for the role of Jesus. He was a worker, who, in his own body, had experienced the violence of the military both at picket lines and in torture room. He could also sing the high notes!

At the outset we agreed that we were going to work collectively as a community. We wanted to learn together, to criticize each other in the spirit of professionalism and to encourage each other, particularly in the face of military disapproval and harassment.

Those who have experienced directing amateur theatre groups know that one of the hardest things to do is to get the cast to internalize their roles. But experience is the mother of all learning and the spring from which we draw our understanding of life. The detainees had gone through many risks, much pain, anguish and militancy in their commitment to serve the people. Their discipline and soul-searching hope had been tested both before and after arrest. The director then had so much material to draw from and to work with in the life experiences of the detainees.

When the cast had to sing a lament begging God's mercy, they only had to be reminded of their desperate cry to be free in order to capture the intensity of the song. When they acted out their role as workers in a garment factory, they had only to live again the consequences of impoverishment to get the tragedy of poverty across. When they had to portray the torture of Jesus, they had only to recall the long days and nights of torture that they had gone through, and their body movements eloquently showed the terror of torture. And at Jesus' murder, they remembered all those who had fallen in pursuit of justice – friends and comrades who have offered their lives for the very same Gospel values – and these memories lit fire in their eyes and thunder in their hearts. Pretence was not necessary. They were reliving their own experiences, the price of the commitment which they have willingly embraced.

We also needed to know Jesus, so rehearsals included time for sharing faith. Who was Jesus? What was his class origin?

What was his experience of life, of mission? How did he become aware of his mission? What were his hopes, fears, his insecurities in the face of the growing antagonism to himself and his message? What does Incarnation mean today? What was his message? What would his fate be if he lived his prophetic role in the Philippines in the 1980s? Long and interesting were our theological discussions as we tried to understand the deeper meaning of the song lyrics and the symbolisms of our movements on stage. ‘In loving your neighbour and in struggling for justice, you shall be blessed!’ was the refrain of the theme song of Jesus which triggered off interesting discussion. Juxtaposing the historical and contemporary Jesus also provoked such interesting discussion at one time the military guard on duty shouted: “Why do you insist that Christ was a revolutionary?”

Through all this, we grew as a community and reached moments of intense pleasure as we saw the exciting fusion of music, poetry, politics, and Christianity.

On Good Friday, we had the first two performances in lieu of the reading of the Passion. As I watched the play unfold I reflected on the irony of this presentation. These are men and women who are part of a crowd whom the state machinery has labelled as communists and atheists. But as they sing the song about Jesus being the way of truth, justice, and freedom, their clear faith shines through their eyes and only the foolish will not be able to feel its intensity. These are the so-called terrorists with no regard for life and peace, but here they manifest their gentleness and integrity nourished through authentic service to their country. These are the supposed renegades who, it is said, abuse civilians in the countryside, forcing them to submit to their demands. But how evident is their sense of discipline and respect for people’s dignity in the way each one contributes to the collective demands of a group not only in presenting a play but also building a community? These are men and women with deep love for everything that lives.

If the powers-that-be could only remove their blinders they would be able to see people not too different from the apostles with their human strengths and weaknesses. We have to ask ourselves, who are the believers of today and who are the ones guilty of idolatry?¹⁹

19. Karl Gaspar, *How Long? Prison Reflections* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1985), 172-5.

REFLECTIONS ON AESTHETIC THEOLOGY OR THE INTERFACING OF THEATRE ARTS AND THEOLOGY IN THE MINDANAO LANDSCAPE²⁰

In the Philippines' cultural matrix, it is easy to bring together theatre and theology. There have arisen countless instances where theatre artists and theologians converged indicating that "theology and art have always gone hand in hand."²¹ If we Filipino Catholics were to trace our roots back to our indigenous ancestors, we can discover that our indigenous belief system required the elements of theatre to reveal its world view, myths, and faith embodiments. Our ancestors' rituals were pure theatre; they needed space, the shamans - the main actors - chanted and danced, musicians provided music mainly capturing the sounds of nature, symbols were created embodying deep meanings and the audience sat around transfixed by the magic of the ritual performances!²²

The rituals stormed the spirit world embedded within the landscape since our ancestors did not have a dualistic notion of the Divinity's abode. The shamans sought to please the spirits for blessings received, to placate them when transgressions were committed and asked for favors from good harvest to healing of the sick. The shamans confronted the people when their behaviour caused the spirits to withhold their favors on account of the people's violation of shared agreements such as the offering of sacrifices.

20. The purpose of Aesthetic Theology is "to investigate the relationship between art and religion/theology". James L. Empeur, "Art and Social Justice," in Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, eds. *Art as Religious Studies* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).

21. Hope S. Antone, "Women, Art and Theology," in *In God's Image: Journal of Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology*, VI, 27, No. 4, 1.

22. See Lenny Mendoza Strobel, *Babaylan, Filipinos and the Call of the Indigenous* (Davao City: Ateneo de Davao University Research and Publication Office, 2010), Stuart Schlegel, *Wisdom from a Rainforest: The Spiritual Journey of an Anthropologist* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1999) and John McAndrews, *People of Power: A Philippine Worldview of Spirit Encounters* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2001).

Theatre productions staged during the martial rule – which are privileged in this essay - served also as rituals.²³ The actors of the plays were not just artists manifesting their talents as they played their roles. They were prophets who stormed the heavens seeking God’s protection from the violent ways of the oppressors even as they confronted their paid agents who violated the people’s rights. In the process, these ordinary theatre artists became theologians as they mobilized their Christian faith to seek to understand the meaning of discipleship in the tumultuous days of martial rule. For in many instances, acting their role meant sticking out their necks; to be on stage with a clinched fist was tantamount to daring the emperor to wield its absolute power.

Engagement in a theatrical production, indeed, is one of the most concrete ways by which the poor – the ordinary folk, the unschooled-unchurched baptized Catholics and the laity that are at the margins of the institutional church – are provided the opportunity “to theologize.” If in the process of theologizing, the faithful undergo a deepening of their understanding and appreciation of their Christian faith, then being part of a theatre experience is one space where the poor become “theological agents.” The premise, of course, is that such engagement translates into concrete action by which they manifest love for God and their neighbour in the context of engagement in social transformation.

This is theologizing that has a very different form, process, aesthetics, and impact on the “reading” public compared to that which is usually privileged by seminaries and universities, even as the two types parallel each other and may need to complement one another. Whereas the latter is primarily captured in written texts and projected in a scholarly manner (usually in a language that originated from the land of the Third World theologians’ colonizer; in our case

23. Apart from Fr. Galenzoga, there were a number of theatre groups throughout Mindanao who became quite active during the martial law period. These included those under EDCADs in the Caraga Region, the LEAD network in Lanao, the ones under Fr. Larry Helar in Zamboanga Sibuguey and those with the UCCP in the Cotabato area. The Mindanao Cultural Network arose when these groups became a network. After martial rule, new theatre groups arose and the most prominent was the Kaliwat Theatre Collective who had collaborative efforts with various church groups.

English), the former lies at the other end. It arises out of the grassroots, thus it needs to be appreciated at that level where the mother tongue is closely intertwined with the people's religio-cultural context. If the theatrical production is able to provide the space for the poor to manifest their faith even as their hearts speak, it is only because they are rooted in a cultural legacy handed down to them from generation to generation. Thus, not only are indigenous linguistics a major element to consider but the language of the heart captured in songs and music.²⁴ The body and its own language are implicated as oftentimes words are not enough to capture meanings. It is through body language that thoughts, emotions and the stirrings of the soul are better expressed. God and/or the spirit world become more accessible through this path. We know that this has always been true among our indigenous ancestors who parallel the ancestors of Jesus himself as we know these in the Old Testament.

In these productions, many of the plays' lines – which were recited, chanted or sung by the actors - echo biblical lamentations. In *Katakomba*, there were songs of lamentations from the beginning till the end of the play; the scriptwriter might as well have been a psalmist. As the play's context showed how easily people could be arrested and imprisoned during martial rule if they struggled for truth and justice, they sought God's protection. One can also understand why the Exodus story provided a popular theme for parish-based theatrical productions as the plot in the book of Exodus was so easily juxtaposed with the tragic narrative of the Marcos era.²⁵

24. The Philippines has a rich legacy in music and songs across the various regions and ethnicities of the archipelago. Various studies have been made on this including publications of the Cultural Center of the Philippines and the National Commission for Culture and the Arts. One of these studies is: Teresita G. Maceda, *Mga Tinig Mula sa Ibaba: Kasaysayan ng Partido Komunista Ng Pilipinas at Partido Sosyalista ng Pilipinas sa Awit, 1930-1955*, (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press and UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies, 1996). Many albums have also been produced and the ones that best manifest this legacy include those of songs composed by Levi Celerio, Manoling Francisco SJ, Gary Granada, Joey Ayala, Popong Landero, Noel Cabangon, and others.

25. Even with the end of the Marcos era, the poverty situation and human rights violations persisted in the country. Thus, we have continued to mount religious plays that incorporate the Exodus event in our missions in Mindanao. The most memorable was the one staged in San Fernando, Bukidnon as we incorporated the ecological issue into the production. See Karl Gaspar, *A People's Option: To Struggle for Creation* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1990).

The advantage of mounting religious plays was how we could just lift texts from the Bible and incorporate these in the script. As the Scriptures were written in a manner that corresponded to a short story or a novel, in many parts, there were actual dialogue between and among characters. Thus in *Hukmanan*, the playwright quoted extensively from Matthew's Gospel. In the Passion Play, we incorporated most of the dialogue of John's Passion narrative. With strong biblical foundations, the theological discourses arose naturally as the plays progressed towards the end. Since the language (mainly the people's mother tongue) and other symbols used are easily accessible to the people's understanding, the process discards the elitist tendency of academe-based theologizing.

We also did short improvisations from Jesus' parables which are easy to adapt to stage as the dialogue is also provided by the texts.²⁶ The power of Jesus' story-telling technique is transported to the contemporary period as the message is timeless. Pagola states what was behind the "seduction of the parables"; Jesus' language was "unique.... There is nothing artificial or forced in his words; everything is clear and simple.... All Galilee is present in his language: its work days and its feast days, its sky and season, its flocks and vineyards, its planting and harvesting, its beautiful lake, and its population of fishers and farmers."²⁷ For community-based theatre groups, such language is easily accessible and the images of both settings can easily coalesce. As with Jesus' parables, theatre's narrative trajectory could shock us into a new understanding of life in its totality.

The plays we mounted through the martial law years had a very strong social justice message. The three productions included in this essay are only a small part of the collection of plays which were mounted. Because of the Alay Kapwa Program that was set up by the National Secretariat of Social Action, Justice and Peace, we had a number of short plays that dealt with national and local situations characterized by the absence of justice. In these plays, it was easy to

26. Some of the popular ones are those of The Good Samaritan, The Prodigal Son, and those of the master of the vineyard and people invited to the banquet.

27. Jose A. Pagola, *Jesus – an Historical Approximation* (Florida, USA: Convivium, 2009), 123.

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parallel Jesus' prophetic praxis as we incorporated his exhortations lifted from Gospel texts. In the various Passion Plays, it was also easy to contextualize Jesus' passion in terms of injustices committed by landlords, big business corporations, the State and its military arm. Given the worsening human rights violations of the ordinary citizens, the Passion Play paralleled Jesus' torture with those of political prisoners.

The morality plays, e.g., *Hukmanan sa Katapusan*, were perhaps the most outspoken plays dealing with injustices and paralleling these with Jesus' prophetic praxis. In *Hukmanan*, the various characters (*Mata, Baba, Kamot, and Tiil*) were presented in a manner that highlighted how unjust they were to the victims of their greed and violence including landless peasants, oppressed workers, indigenous peoples, women and children and political prisoners. In the process, they were judged from the perspective of Jesus' exhortations as recounted in the Beatitudes and other texts.

In the course of plays being written, contemporary "Scriptures" are arising. Just as the Pasyon taken up in Iletto's book is the Passion narrative embraced by the Tagalogs and goes beyond the Bible texts, so also other Pasyon scripts written by various scriptwriters are the Passion narratives embraced by other peoples in this country. If one were to collect all the scripts that have been written touching on biblico-theological themes, we could put together a contemporary Scripture for our own use.

One advantage that a theatre production has that written theological discourses don't have is the former's collective identity. A play is a collaboration of a community of writers, actors, production designers, and others who take on various tasks. The latter mostly is the work of a lone wolf which can tend to be individual-oriented. For "theatre is a communal art"; as such, "the dramatist must be able to evoke a collective response from a live audience."²⁸

A theatre that is able to project the voice of the poor and oppressed - and in the process manages to evoke a collective response - is best accomplished in the context of a theatre group being

28. John Grube, "Henrik Ibsen Introduction," Henrik Ibsen, *Four Major Plays* (New York: Lafayette, 1966).

community-based. An amateur group of actors can mount a play once they embrace a collective ethic. Thus, the Base Ecclesial Community can provide the best milieu for the rise of such a group that can mount relevant theatrical improvisations. If liberation can only be achieved if a united people are collectively engaged in social transformation, then mounting a play takes on a liberating orientation. Gathered as one for the same cause, the actors manifest the power of community.

As with other forms of art, a theatre piece has great value if it arises from nothing apart from the imagination of those who collaborate to produce the play. In biblical language, in the beginning there was nothing but the void. Then God began to create what would ultimately be the universe, the great cosmic reality! Artists are blessed because they are God's co-creators! Once inspired because of an idea, a vision or a dream, theatre artists bring forth a creation that has the power to introduce change in people's lives. The gift of creativity in turn brings to the world an art-gift which manifests the depths of God's aesthetics. But the ultimate value of this art-gift is what it can truly contribute to the irruption of God's reign.

In my own experience as well as those of other churchworkers who have been involved in this field through the past decades, the unintended consequence of theatre is that popular theologizing processes arise. When a theatre group undergoes the mounting of a Passion Play, they have to be grounded on a collective Christological perspective. Questions arise – Who was Jesus of Nazareth and why did those horrible things happen to him? What led to his Resurrection and for what? Who is Jesus for Christians today for actors immersed in a very concrete reality of poverty and victimization? How is he to be “imaged” on stage so that the audience are able to “recapture” the person that He was to his disciplines? (There was even a discussion on what the actor playing the Jesus character should wear at the crucifixion scene – should he be wearing that white cloth around his waist or keep on his *maong* pants?)²⁹

29. An interesting discussion arose when we mounted the Passion Play at the St. Jude Parish in Davao City in 1975 with the play – *KINSAY INYONG GIPANGITA* (Who are you looking for?) Some of the traditional members of the cast wanted the traditional white garb around the waist. The “progressive”

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As most of the plays we mounted arose out of our commitment to resist martial rule and as we internalized the theological method of liberation theology that became popular in the late 60s to the 70s, it was easy for us to take cognizance of Vatican II's admonition to read the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel.³⁰ There were plays that already had written scripts but in many occasions plays were mounted out of improvisations especially if these were meant for activities that focused on specific issues. In both cases, there was always an attempt to profile a situationer being the manifestation of the signs of the times. The research involved in gathering data and the ensuing analysis became the first moment of the theological circle.

Entering into the pain and suffering of the impoverished masses brings the actors into the internalization of these emotions which become their own.³¹ Here is where the biblical tradition of lamentations was easy to appropriate. And the God to whom they express their cry is truly the God of history. This accounts for why the Passion Play has remained quite popular in our society up till today.³² Storming the heavens by way of manifesting raw emotions

ones wanting to project Jesus as a poor man wanted him wearing his tattered maong pants. There was a most interesting discussion on this leading to a discussion on who was Jesus and what was/is His mission. We all agreed in the end that the maong pants were more appropriate.

30. Even after martial rule ended, the Mindanao theatre movement sustained its role of resisting new forms of oppression while confronting other issues affecting the marginalized: peasants, workers, indigenious peoples, women and children and the like.

31. Through influences coming from various sources that would have its genealogical roots in the techniques of the Russian theatre practitioner, Constantin Stanislavki who was influenced by the Realism school, "method acting" became one of the popular manner by which the actors acted on stage for most of these productions. This method involved being in touch at the moment with one's own trajectory of emotions arising out of concrete life experiences. This method comes out naturally from most actors of our productions as they do not even have to "imagine" what the pains and sufferings of their characters were as most suffered the very same pains and sufferings. This is the main advantage of community-based theatre groups. Other major influences on Mindanao theatre aesthetics that those of Brecht and Boal as appropriated by Philippine-based groups.

32. Which can also be said of our *teleseryes* which have parallels with the Passion Play in terms of the interfacing of victim-victimizer, oppressed-oppressor, light-darkness, good-evil and the end that brings about some kind of resolution that gives closure to the stories.

is one integral element of this theatre tradition. Which is why the main indicator of a theatre production's success is oftentimes linked with the Ilonggo expression: *kung maghibi, namit* (it is worthwhile if someone cries). It is oftentimes quite easy to get the audience to be so moved that tears flow down their cheeks; actors just have to be in "the moment". The here and now becomes truly an integral element of the theologizing process.

Discipleship is another key theological theme of these productions. *Katakomba's* central theme was the cost of discipleship as it leads to martyrdom. From the perspective of "nationalist-oriented" plays, one becomes a disciple not just by loving one's neighbour but one's country.³³ Morality plays like *Hukmanan sa Katapusan* can be quite challenging because they confront the audience with their inability to take seriously Christ's exhortation to take up the cross and follow him. During martial rule, one carried the cross for witnessing to justice, truth, freedom, and peace. The witness of the actors was that they were willing to be arrested and imprisoned in case the military came to raid the theatre and pronounced them as subversives. By so taking a courageous stance, the audience, too, are empowered to respond to the challenge. All – actors and audience – are affirmed in the belief that courage begets courage; it is fear that paralyzes.

Social justice and its related issues which became part of the texture of the Filipino people's lives – inequality owing to the elite's control over resources, landlessness, unemployment, inaccessibility of government's services, impact of poverty on the poor's quality of life, prejudices against the marginalized, human rights violations and fragmentation in society – are powerful themes of the Mindanawon theatre movement. Through these plays, there were a courageous few who counter-acted this dehumanizing network through "the human imaginative process wherein we can find the

33. This was a key theme in Bonifacio Ilagan's *Pagsambang Bayan* which was mounted at the height of martial law directed by Ben Cervantes and remounted a number of times after martial rule. See Gaspar, *The Masses are Messiah: Contemplating the Filipino Soul*. This was also a theme of another play I mounted in 1975 – *Bubi sa Kanunay* – mounted a number of times in Mindanao, Cebu, and Bohol with its latest performances in Cebu on 24-25 September 2011.

resources for the victims of history to change the web of power and self-depreciation in which they are caught.”³⁴

Our theatre practice embraced the notion that a “just world order presupposes a transformation not only of individuals but of groups and their world views” and “spirituality cannot be isolated from the ministry of justice” which demanded a certain perspective of working out the human imagination.³⁵ Consequently, this process involved symbols, images, and myths which helped us to counter neo-colonialism, feudalism, government neglect and corruption and societal fragmentation.

Theatre has an edge over the written word because human imaginations are more intensely engaged through symbols. Empeureur gives his explanations why symbols are enabling elements: “...they have the ability to point to several different meanings at the same time; they call for a response; ...they are the seemingly irrational causes of our emotions and desires; ...one symbol leads to another and so can lead one into a symbol system; and symbols produce presence through the concentration of awareness.”³⁶

Human imagination is God’s gift to humanity. Artists in our midst are the ones who are privileged by this gift which makes it possible for them to construct an alternative world. If mounted with authenticity and truth, these productions can only bring new consciousness, meaningful emotions and enhanced relationality with peoples and the universe. They help promote imaginative living that presupposes a justice-oriented spirituality which “creates the proper context for the transformation of the world” which is why “(t)his is the way that art does justice.”³⁷

The context of the martial law period is both the same as well as different with the reality of the country in this post-modern era. The call for transformation that would lead to the upliftment of the poor and powerless is as relevant during the 1970s-80s as well as today. In fact today’s realities are far worse in terms of the extent of

34. James L. Empeureur, “Art and Social Justice,” in *Art as Religious Studies*, ed. Doug Adams and Diane A. Cappadona (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 174.

35. *Ibid.*, 175.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*

poverty and disenfranchisement despite the improvement in terms of political governance which nonetheless is still bedevilled by massive corruption. However, owing to the impact of globalization and the rise of high-tech gadgetry, the situation has become more complex.

This is especially true in regard to what the post-martial law generation – those who constitute the majority of Filipinos who are below 25 years of age – faces today. They have to contend with all kinds of pressures from having OFW parents to being able to attain a good education, from finding employment after college to being at risk to HIV-AIDS and other physical diseases and social illnesses. Their easy access to the internet's social networking makes them very vulnerable to all the pressures surrounding them leading towards various dysfunctional behaviours.

This generation, however, can learn from the experiences of their elders who were their age in the late 60s to mid-80s in how the latter dealt with oppressive social pressures. They faced the “enemy” head-on and through theatre and cultural work creatively helped transform the structures of society. Theatre remains a powerful cultural field for the youth of today to express their angst while critiquing the social ills that could block a bright future for them.

However, as film has become an accessible art for the youth of today, it is perhaps this medium that can provide them the creative tools to participate in the task of social transformation.

Church personnel who are engaged in youth programs today can certainly look back to how it was during the martial law years and learn how the youth were mobilized to contribute towards inculturated liturgical celebrations and a vibrant conscientization program. As the church provided young people with the space to express themselves through the various aspects of arts and culture, there was also a transformation that took place within the local church as young people found themselves enriching the liturgical celebrations.

What ultimately was the contribution of theatre to the rise of a progressive Church in Mindanao was how it interfaced with liturgy. We had stated earlier that in order to evade arrests, theatre groups sought the support of the hierarchy and the clergy to protect them from the State's military. Eventually, they found the altar as the appropriate space to mount their productions. Parish priests and church workers who were very open to the discourse of inculturation

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and contextualization of liturgy proceeded to have their Liturgy of the Word dramatized. The Eucharistic celebration became the locus for some of these productions.

Their efforts would later find resonance in Schwager's writings:

In the beginning, the religious-social differences were cancelled out in the celebration itself (Gal.3:28). The poor were fed and conflicts were resolved. Even if these duties are nowadays largely separated in time from the liturgical celebration, their objective relatedness to it remains fully preserved. If the connection were lost, prayer in the liturgy would also necessarily degenerate into a magic recitation of formulas. The relation to the drama of life is therefore essential for the liturgy as dramatic action. Because it is not just any sort of play, but the performance and making present of the drama of salvation in Christ, it summons to decision making.... The liturgy is, then, not only the performance of a drama; as effective representation it releases a process of judgment and provokes decisions which reach into the inmost depths of the participants.³⁸

When the Eucharistic celebration's underlying meaning is presented in this manner, one can readily see how much more powerful the Mass becomes if the Liturgy of the Word is presented in a manner that "releases a process of judgement and provokes decision" through a theatrical medium that embodies such powerful messages. It is in the light that theatre helps to enhance a theological discourse. In a space where a theatrical production unfolds, art and theology conspire to open our eyes to God's reign and help us see how we can truly be part of its in-breaking!

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38. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation*, 228-9.