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Documenting Theatrical and Performative Philippines: Possibilities of a Task and a Practice

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The writing of theatre history has been a challenging intellectual commitment in the Philippines. This mode of inquiry and inscription largely manifests more as a strand of general historiography than as a systematized and specialized critical practice in Philippine academe. No wonder, then, that Philippine theatre histories primarily come from academics whose disciplinary backgrounds are not solely in theatre arts *per se* but in a range of different but intersecting disciplines, such as film, literature, dance, anthropology, history and music. These historians have accounted for the medium's forms,[1] geographies of production and performance,[2] material aspects,[3] lead practitioners,[4] groups or organizations,[5] and historical periods.[6] They have thus far yielded a congeries of print materials: from the encyclopedia[7] to the anthology or reader,[8] the survey,[9] up to the full-length book manuscript. More recently, theatre histories have also appeared in online catalogues or digital repositories.[10]

However, despite these textual productions, there are not enough varieties of theatre histories being written, circulated and read in the country. Further, there has been no deep and thoughtful contemplation about the conceptual, theoretical and methodological frameworks underpinning these theatre histories. Although it has been clear that these chronicles of past theatres have followed the logical trajectories entailed or prescribed by nation-building projects, there has yet to be a judicious evaluation of how theatre histories operate under the national(ist) fold. Outside projects of nation building and Filipino identity formation, is there a strong clamour for theatre histories? Or, more precisely, are there other, more democratic or egalitarian, opportunities to carry out the historiographical operation beyond the schemes of the nation, the national or the nationalist? It is evident that the writing of Philippine theatre histories continues to wrestle with anxieties of colonial negation. A great number of grand Philippine historical narratives have come into view to talk about, *inter alia*, the existence of a thriving performance culture in the precolonial period or the subversive potential of the theatre during colonial or authoritarian regimes. In this light, one can further ask, what has the analytical category of 'nation' or the ideology of 'nationalism' allowed to prosper in the writing of theatre histories? And, concomitantly, what has it curtailed and why?

It is time to imagine Philippine theatre histories not from the space of the nation, but from a more scaled-down (or perhaps less overdrawn) geographic locus, such as the city, the island or the region. Given the archipelagic constitution of the Philippines and its long histories of commercial and cultural exchange with its neighbouring countries in Asia, it would be refreshing and thrilling to witness the unfolding of theatre histories that bypass the ethos of nationhood. In this light, we can start asking, how might viewing the

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sources and influences, as well as the production and consumption, of theatres and performances in connection to land masses or waterways shift our understanding of theatrical formations and transformations in the country?

There is also something to be gained from expanding academe- and state-sanctioned theatre histories, and incorporating more downsized but nonetheless equally important histories. Here, the lives of those who are emplaced in, or enfolded by, the theatrical encounter as it was taking place and time – such as artists (i.e. directors, dramaturgs, actors and actresses), production people (i.e. light, costume and scene designers and production and stage managers) and audiences (i.e. elite patrons, fans and theatre-goers) – come to mind. To be sure, there is much to be gained from these human subjects, especially when their historical existence gets intertwined with gender, class and race, among other things.

Unravelling the political economy of the theatre might be a productive pursuit. It is interesting to foreground the figure of the businessman, the entrepreneur and the professional artist, to name a few, in complicating the highly commercial industry of the theatre, whether in the colonial or the postcolonial period. Underscoring the ecologies where Philippine theatres happened offers multiple inquiries as well. How did disasters and catastrophes (man-made or natural) impact the institutions, the infrastructures and the industries of Philippine theatres? Furthermore, it might be a rewarding venture to take full stock of past theatrical events not in terms of their positive contributions – to local or national communities, to subversive collectives, or to statist efforts to educate the citizenry and initiate them into nationhood – but rather based on their scandalous, controversial and troubling tendencies. There might be something edifying, if not moving, in writing theatre histories that account for the failures of theatre artists, the eccentricities of directors, the shenanigans of companies, and even the misbehaviours of audiences.

Theatre history in the country must keep up with the many performances occurring outside orthodox theatres that directly respond to contemporary sociopolitical events. The theatricality of rallies and the street performances against, say, the Drug War that the administration of Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte has enacted since 2016 are available examples. The hyperactive documentation of embodied cultural performances (like rituals and festivals) that spectators and agents themselves conduct through technological means and disseminate via social media networks (like YouTube and Facebook) likewise proffers new horizons of inquiry and modes of research to the theatre historian. It might be a profitable undertaking to consider theatre collectives in the current dispensation that obtain historical purchase through their purported 'independence', 'marginality', 'non-elitism', 'regionality' or 'globality'. It is the duty of a theatre historian to appraise these terms in relation to contemporary incarnations of theatre-making and practice. At present, there is also much to comprehend about global productions of theatre and the permutation of subject positions of Filipino theatre artists within these procedures, such as the overseas Filipino performer and the Broadway or West End-imported Filipino stage actor or actress.

Surely, there is much talk about the crisis of history and of the theatre in the country. While there have been increasing investments in the production of theatre

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and performance, both past and present, there is not enough historiographic practice going on within and outside the Philippine capital to document and interpret all these. The same names crop up as the key writers and therefore shapers of existing histories. Unlike so-called theatre critics, who have convened their own organization and arrogated to themselves the duty of awarding and sanctifying the best of the annual theatrical harvest,[11] no organizational build-up or academic attempt of a similar kind can be pointed out for theatre historians.

In the current academic climate in the Philippines there is no academic post solely dedicated to a theatre historian. There is also no sustained and substantial pedagogical programme that teaches the rudiments of researching, writing and interpreting theatrical events of the past. Certainly, the country needs institutional interventions that foster systematic historical study, training, knowledge and understanding of the theatre. Training potential theatre historians and exposing them to other frameworks and methodologies in accounting for and interpreting theatrical events are essential. But, more importantly, the establishment of an institutionalized academic system like a doctoral programme in theatre or performance studies must take place sooner rather than later. Hopefully this would add variation to, if not contest, how specific social forces, like the business market or the media industry, mould the theatre industry and its histories. No matter how belated, there is no better time and place to enrich and enliven the practice of theatre history in Philippine academe – where it has been floundering in the face of heavily practice-based approaches to studying the art of the theatre – than in the here and now.

NOTES

1 Nicanor G. Tiongson, *Kasaysayan at Estetika ng Sinakulo at Ibang Dulang Panrelihoyon sa Malolos* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1975); Doreen G. Fernandez, *The Iloilo Zarzuela: 1903–1930* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1978); Nicanor G. Tiongson, *Philippine Theater: A History and Anthology, Vol. 2: Komedya* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1999); Tiongson, *Philippine Theater: A History and Anthology, Vol. 3: Sinakulo* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1999).

2 Wilhelmina Q. Ramas, *Sugbuanon Theatre from Sotto to Rodriguez and Kabahar: An Introduction to Pre-war Sugbuanon Drama* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1982); Resil B. Mojares, *Theater in Society, Society in Theater: Social History of a Cebuano Village, 1840–1940* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1985).

3 Cristina Laconico Buenaventura, *The Theater in Manila 1846–1946* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1994); Pacita C. Gavino, 'A History of Scene Design for Philippine Theater, 1846-1969', in Jonathan Chua and Rosario Cruz Lucero, eds., *A Reader in Philippine Theater: History and Criticism* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2014), pp. 3–25; meLê yamomo, *Sounding Modernities: Theatre and Music in Manila and the Asia Pacific, 1869–1946* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

4 Nicanor G. Tiongson, *Salvador F. Bernal: Designing the Stage* (Manila: National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 2007); Daisy Hontiveros Avellana, *The Drama of It: A Life on Film and Theater* (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, 2009).

5 Miguel A. Bernad, *Dramatics at the Ateneo de Manila: A History of Three Decades, 1921–1952* (Manila: Ateneo Alumni Association, 1997); Arthur P. Casanova, *The Kambayoka Book: The First Thirty Years of the Sining Kambayoka of the Mindanao State University, Marawi City* (Manila: University of Santo

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6 Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio, *The 'Seditious' Tagalog Playwrights: Early American Occupation* (Manila: Zarzuela Foundation of the Philippines, Inc., 1972); Doreen Fernandez, 'Philippine Theatre after Martial Law', *Asian Theatre Journal*, 4, 1 (1987), pp. 108–14; Priscelina Patajo-Legasto, 'The Impact of American Colonial Rule on Philippine Theater', in Priscelina Patajo Legasto, ed., *The Filipiniana Reader* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1998), pp. 44–61.

7 See *CCP Encyclopedia of Philippine Art, Vol. 7: Philippine Theater* (Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1994).

8 Jonathan Chua and Rosario Cruz-Lucero, eds., *A Reader in Philippine Theater: History and Criticism* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2014).

9 Isagani R. Cruz, ed., *A Short History of Theater in the Philippines* (n.p., 1971); Nicanor G. Tiongson, *Dulaan: An Essay on Philippine Theater* (Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1989); Doreen G. Fernandez, *Palabas: Essays on Philippine Theater History* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1996).

10 See the University of the Philippines-funded Philippine Performance Archive, http://philippineperformance-repository.upd.edu.ph/information.html and http://blog.palabas.org, accessed 27 January 2019.

11 Founded in 1997, the Philippine Legitimate Stage Artists Group Inc. or PHILSTAGE introduces itself as 'the country's only organization of professional performing arts companies'. The organization aims to 'propagate, protect, and unite the professional Philippine performing arts industry'. In 2008, it established Gawad Buhay, an annual awards ceremony that recognizes outstanding productions of member companies. This is the much-vaunted local equivalent of Broadway's Tony Awards or the West End's Olivier Awards. See the Facebook page of PHILSTAGE for the group's mission and vision: www.facebook.com/pg/gawadbuhay/about. Also see Audie Gemora, '10 years of the Philstage Gawad Buhay: Come Celebrate with us on April 12' (7 April 2018), *Lifestyle.Inq*, at https://lifestyle.inquirer.net/290946/10-years-philstage-gawad-buhay-come-celebrate-us-april-12, accessed 22 March 2018.

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