

# Ballet Philippines: A Sociological History<sup>1</sup>

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Ballet Philippines developed into an internationally renowned dance company during a time of great social upheaval in the Philippines. It began in 1970 when The Alice Reyes and Dance Company staged a Modern Dance Concert at the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) in Manila. The company grew from a short-term project that introduced modern dance to the Philippines and later, as a full-fledged international touring company, to a worldwide audience. It has often been described as "one of the premier dance companies of Southeast Asia" (Logarta 1990) and has carried the banner for Filipino culture to international audiences ranging from Australia, to Japan, to Europe, and to the United States. These audiences have been very receptive to the marriage of eastern and western dance forms. The company became known as the CCP Dance Company and in 1981 it was renamed Ballet Philippines. Its more than thirty-year history has been inextricably linked to the myriad of social changes that have affected Philippine society.

This paper provides an overview of the sociological history of Ballet Philippines. I shall attempt to chart the changing fortunes of this dance company and, in the process, indicate how the shifting nature of the political and economic arrangements of Philippine

society has both provided opportunities for and imposed constraints upon this particular dance company. In its broadest form, this essay serves as a case study of the complex interrelationships between the political and the economic contexts, and the manner in which ballet, as an art form, can take shape within a developing society. Apparently, there has been very little sociological investigation of the problems addressed herein.

The last thirty years has been a time of considerable social, political, and economic upheaval in the Philippines. Martial law was introduced in 1972 by President Ferdinand Marcos and remained in force until his regime was overthrown in 1986. The presidencies of Corazon Aquino and Fidel Ramos reestablished an electoral democracy in the country and this resulted in a more liberal political environment. During the entire period, however, the economy of the Philippines was relatively stunted with "the majority of Filipinos continu[ing] to live in a state of severe hardship" (Pinches 1996, 107). It was within this social, political, and economic context that Ballet Philippines evolved. We shall explore how a dance company from an economically depressed developing country was able not only to survive but also to have attained international recognition.

In June 2000 I spent some time in Manila examining the archival material on Ballet Philippines at the CCP library, and I have relied on these data. I also had the opportunity to interview a number of the leading Filipino choreographers of Ballet Philippines about their experiences with the company. This paper draws heavily on interviews with the founder, Alice Reyes,<sup>2</sup> as well as Edna Vida and Agnes Locsin—all of whom served as artistic directors of Ballet Philippines. Moreover, my interviews with Eddie Elejar, Tony Fabella, Gener Caringal, Denisa Reyes, and Alden Lugnasin (all of them choreographers for the company at one time) provided me with essential background materials for interpreting the changing fortunes of Ballet Philippines over the course of about thirty years. I am very grateful for their cooperation.

#### APOLITICAL PATRONAGE

The development of Ballet Philippines cannot be separated from the social, economic, and political milieu. It emerged during the Marcos era, at a time when “high culture” was presided over by the First Lady, Imelda Marcos. As First Lady, Imelda Marcos saw herself as a patron of the arts. She had commissioned the construction of the Cultural Center of the Philippines and had sponsored a considerable range of artistic activities such as operas and symphonies. She was also the patron of Ballet Philippines. Yet, contrary to popular belief, her official patronage was apparently a complex one. According to Alice Reyes, “We always had her as a patron on paper because it was the thing to do. People thought we had her blessings but no, it was far from that.” From Reyes’s

perspective, “There were a lot of people who resented the fact [that] we were in. And they thought I was in there because of Imelda. They did not understand that it was a fight to say alive.”

Alice Reyes explained that she had a very special tie with Imelda Marcos that went back many years. Before she married Marcos, Imelda Romualdez had taken voice lessons from Alice Reyes’s mother, Adoracion Reyes. This particular bond resulted in a great deal of tension, for Imelda Marcos did not want to be reminded of her past. Alice Reyes observes: “We knew her when she was poor. That was a bad thing. She wanted to be known as having been born with a silver spoon in her mouth. She always held it against me.” Yet the strain between Alice Reyes and Imelda Marcos should not be exaggerated. The tensions in the relationship appear to be limited to petty comments that the First Lady directed at Alice Reyes. She reacted to the barbs of the First Lady with the statement: “Madam, this is your company, you are our Chairman.”

Imelda Marcos seems to have profited socially and politically from her patronage of Ballet Philippines. She was not especially interested in ballet, her appreciation of dance being limited to feting the high profile guest artists who came to Manila. She used their visits as an opportunity to throw lavish parties. She evidently did not appreciate (or take any special interest in) the original works such as *Amada*<sup>3</sup> and *Itim Asu*<sup>4</sup> that utilized Filipino cultural themes, even though these are the productions that brought Ballet Philippines its international recognition as a world-

class dance company with a unique Filipino style.

Elaborating on Imelda Marcos's commitment to ballet, Alice Reyes concluded that "she would seize the opportunity ...when we would have a big [guest] artist and take over.

"When Makarova, Natasha Makarova, came—she was big—somebody told Imelda that she was big and immediately, the invitation came up...she could stay in the palatial guestroom, cars were sent for her, you know, message at night, summons: come to a little intimate party for 300 people."

Alice Reyes would make it a point to include at least one of its Philippine works in the program—such as *Amada* or *Itim Asu*—of the performances with the guest artist for she wanted to demonstrate to the highly international audience just where the company was in its own artistic development. Imelda Marcos would leave by the back when Ballet Philippines performed the Philippine works.

While being the resident company at the CCP had its benefits such as free rehearsal and performance space, the company had to continuously engage in fundraising for all other expenses. Ballet Philippines had to compete with other artistic groups for the same limited pool of resources. Having Imelda Marcos as their patron undoubtedly helped. Yet, the fund raising activity of the Marcoses would, of course, be given priority by the contributors.

Alice Reyes elaborated on the problem of fund raising. "In those days, with the

political scene under the Marcoses, the fund-raising was quite difficult. They were doing so much fund raising themselves.... You had [business] companies that said, we don't have this money because when Imelda Marcos comes calling for a check....our budget is [limited]. I was always confronted with that."

Nevertheless, Ballet Philippines thrived during this period. The company had built an extensive and varied repertoire of classical ballet and modern dance along with its unique Filipino works. It was during this period that Ballet Philippines established a reputation as a company that had the ability to attract audiences worldwide, and artistic critics generally wrote glowingly about their performances. In effect this dance company had become a cultural ambassador for the country (Logarta 1990), and thus indirectly provided social legitimacy for the Marcos regime in various parts of the globe.

It should be apparent that the success of Ballet Philippines needs to be understood within the social, political, and economic context in which it emerged. Imelda Marcos was a powerful patron who occupied a politically well-defined position as First Lady, and her husband was the most important politician in the country. Under these circumstances, the question arises as to how Ballet Philippines was able to sustain a considerable degree of autonomy and was able to pursue its artistic goals with a minimum of political interference by the Marcoses.

First, it should be recognized that Alice Reyes not only knew Imelda Marcos as a young woman but also had

developed an extensive social network with a wide range of influential persons within the Philippines. Thus, Alice Reyes's social capital undoubtedly aided the fund raising efforts for the ballet company. Second, as mentioned earlier, Imelda Marcos did not have an active interest in ballet as an artistic endeavor in its own right. Rather her sponsorship provided her with the opportunity to interact with world-renowned artists (and celebrities) from other nations. Her lack of interest in ballet as an art form also meant that she did not intervene in shaping the artistic development of Ballet Philippines. There was no hint of direct intervention in specific ways in which this art form was created. Third, the ballet's global activities and the artistic acclaim it achieved gave the company considerable autonomy. As an instance when Imelda Marcos wanted the ballet to remain in Manila for the Miss Universe pageant, the international tour took precedence. Alice Reyes explains:

We had arranged for a 52-performance tour in Asia, starting from Australia and then all over Asia. It was wonderful because we were able to get some funding from the government. There was [also] pressure on Philippines Airlines to give us tickets. Of course everything else was done on our own. But Imelda was having the Miss Universe [pageant] at the Folk Arts Theater, and she did not want us to leave. Because it was a dictatorship we had to have her okay. Just imagine what stress that was...She was saying, "Why are they going to leave, everybody is going to come here to perform." It took

all kinds of staff men to go to her box one night and they had to say, "Madam, it is going to be an international embarrassment if you don't let them go because commitments have been made and tickets had been sold. They must go."

That the members and supporters of Ballet Philippines seem to have understood the paradoxes inherent in the patronage afforded the ballet company by Imelda Marcos is well expressed by Edna Vida: "We were so apolitical, right? We had to be apolitical. First of all, we were always... accused of catering so much to Imelda Marcos, which is one hundred percent not true. We did cater to her because she was it...Any snap of her fingers and she would get what she was asking for. But she could never dictate to us what she wanted."

The Marcos regime in the Philippines came to a rather abrupt end in 1986 as the country experienced a major political upheaval—an upheaval that was chronicled by the world press in some detail. The 1986 Revolution brought in the administration of President Corazon Aquino, and it ushered in a new phase for Ballet Philippines.

#### **NATIONALISTIC CONTENT**

The Aquino administration came to expect that Ballet Philippines would play a more overt political role in fostering Filipino nationalism. This expectation was explicitly laid out in a statement made in 1987 by President Corazon Aquino during the 17th Anniversary Concert Season. She exhorted artists to "let the dance also portray the artist as a Filipino who is

proud of his nation's history, people, and heritage" (Logarta 1990). There was a nationalistic fervor in the country that was not present before, and this fervor permeated every aspect of society as it swept through the nation. The arts were only one of the outlets for the promulgation of this nationalism. Edna Vida confirmed this trend. "This happened during the Cory administration ...because there was such a surge of nationalism. We ousted a dictator and had huge Filipino crowds marching in the streets. And the people up there [the leaders] wanted to put that in the arts."

The impact of nationalism on Ballet Philippines was evident in the themes of its ballet's new works. This pattern was especially evident in the performances that were staged soon after the Revolution. For example, one of the first events was the Silayan<sup>5</sup>, a month-long Festival of the Arts held at the CCP. It was described in the program as "the artists' celebration of freedom and their pledge to uphold it" (Cultural Center of the Philippines 1987a). Artists were now considered to be a "potent social force" in shaping the new Philippines. The month-long celebration culminated in a literary-musical revue, "Art for Freedom." Ballet Philippines' contribution to the Handog Sa Bayan<sup>6</sup> was especially choreographed by Agnes Locsin and Edna Vida to two songs, *Ngayon*<sup>7</sup> by Canseco-Nepomuceno, and *Magsimula Ka*<sup>8</sup> by Tan-Nepomuceno, sung by the Philippine Madrigal Singers (Cultural Center of the Philippines 1987b). Agnes Locsin, for example, did a social commentary piece on the ousting of the Marcoses, but she described it as "trite."

For the remainder of that season, the performances staged by Ballet Philippines had distinctive Filipino themes. Aside from the performances of classical ballet works, the others included *Portraits of the Filipina* (Cultural Center of the Philippines 1987c), and *Siete Dolores* and *Ang Pilya* (Cultural Center of the Philippines 1988). While Ballet Philippines always presented a performance of Filipino works every season, the offering for this season appeared to heavily emphasize the cultural traditions of the Philippines. The program for *Portraits of the Filipina* was made up of five works from the Ballet Philippines by Filipino composers (see Appendix A). The selection of works to be choreographed to Filipino composers was not a coincidence, for the program also stated that the "program was presented in cooperation with the League of Filipino composers in Celebration of the 1987 Philippine Music Festival" (Cultural Center of the Philippines 1987c).

The other program offered that season was *Siete Dolores* and *Ang Pilya*. *Ang Pilya* is William Morgan's Filipino adaptation of the comic ballet classic *La Fille Mal Gardee* and *Siete Dolores* is an original work by Denisa Reyes. While both are story ballets that have Filipino story lines, *Siete Dolores* combines the themes of religion and revolution. In it, *Inang Bayan*, the motherland, laments the suffering of her children, who represent the different sectors of contemporary Philippine society, and urges them to struggle for freedom (Cultural Center of the Philippines 1988). This theme of revolution is a departure from previous Filipino story ballets that tended to be based on folk tales.

What we have, then, especially in the early period of the Aquino revolution, is a movement not only to glorify the revolution but also to privilege various sectors of Filipino society, including the folk traditions. By incorporating these once marginal traditions into ballet, the ballet demonstrated how these once marginal groups contributed to "high culture" and helped give expression to Filipino nationalism.

It should be noted that Ballet Philippines did play a "national" role during the Marcos era. For example, the CCP Dance Company was part of a report on Philippine Cultural Development on behalf of President Ferdinand Marcos and First Lady Imelda Marcos (Reyes, n.d.). In this report Reyes outlined the objectives of the company, among which were "the expansion of a distinctly Filipino dance form" and the promotion of "the Philippine art and culture abroad." However, during the Aquino era, Ballet Philippines was drawn more directly into the political fray, and the ballet company was expected to advance a social and political agenda, particularly to further nationalism.

Although the Aquino administration expected Ballet Philippines, and the arts in general, to play a supportive role in fostering the emerging nationalism, the arts, it should be emphasized, took a back seat with respect to almost all budgetary considerations. This resulted in financial and other problems for the ballet. Edna Vida observed:

Cory's time and the following years were very difficult for us because we

were at the bottom of the priority list for government [expenditures]. Everybody was busy supporting the revolution and nobody was going to give money to the arts.

It could be argued that there was stagnation in the arts at this time. The contradictory combination of a decline in funding and the required support of nationalism in the Philippines at this time did not provide fertile ground for the development of Ballet Philippines. This period also marked the beginning of what was to be a downturn in the fortunes of the company.

#### PERSONALITY POLITICS

Following the demise of the Aquino regime, Ballet Philippines seems to have entered a third phase in its thirty-year existence. In general, this encompassed both the Ramos and the Estrada regimes (until the time of the conclusion of my research in mid-2000). During this period there has been a decline in the vitality of the company. When Fidel Ramos was President, the First Lady, Amelita Ramos, became the patron of Ballet Philippines. According to Edna Vida, the situation of the Ballet improved, but Amelita Ramos did not promote "high culture" as did Imelda Marcos.

At the time of the interviews, Ballet Philippines had shrunk to only twelve company members, two men and ten women, compared to more than thirty when at full-strength. It has been maintained at this strength for some time, although the company recently has had auditions, and now has eight apprentices

and two scholars (Ballet Philippines 2001). Agnes Locsin describes the main problems facing the company as a lack of adequate funding and the departure of some dancers.

The exodus of men has been an especially vexing problem. Agnes Locsin sees the financial imperative as the main reason why men leave. The rising cost of living effectively shrank the dancers' salaries. It seems that many leave Ballet Philippines to go into commercial dance, which is more lucrative. Agnes Locsin observed that "for the men, the pressure to earn more is greater than for the girls, because the girls can rely on mommy and daddy but not the boys,...they go commercial or they go to other companies or they go abroad."

A second factor in its decline has been the politicization of Ballet Philippines and its involvement in the politics of the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP). When Joseph Estrada became president in 1998 he apparently created a far-reaching controversy when he appointed a new board of trustees for the CCP (Villaruz 1999). The appointment put the new board in confrontation with the board that had been appointed by former President Ramos. Moreover, the appointment created tensions between various members of the CCP administrative staff because of long-standing disagreements among various factions. Edna Vida describes Ballet Philippines as becoming highly politicized: "They are now fighting with the present CCP administration." One consequence of all these personality politics is that after many years of struggling to remain apolitical, Ballet

Philippines had become caught up in the political fray.

A third factor in the decline of Ballet Philippines is less evident from the interviews, but nonetheless quite apparent. This is the fact that the ballet company and other art forms associated with "high culture" have had to compete actively with the mass entertainment industry for resources, for time, and for the public attention. The displacement of Ballet Philippines from the rehearsal space it had occupied since 1969 by the Broadway musical *Miss Saigon* in late 2000 is symbolic of what has transpired. The intrusion of the mass entertainment, with its base in a market economy, needs to be recognized as a social force that competes with traditional "high culture" art forms.

#### **BROADER IMPLICATIONS**

Having outlined the three phases of Ballet Philippines over its thirty-plus years of existence, we can now examine the broader sociological implications of the history of this dance company. Ballet Philippines is an informative case study, for it emerged within an economically depressed developing nation and achieved a position of international prominence.

We have delineated three phrases of this dance company's history. Initially the dominant political influence was the patronage of Imelda Marcos. She did not directly control the company, and her patronage was fairly benign. The tensions between the First Lady and the company seemed to have stemmed to a considerable degree from the personal relationship between Imelda Marcos and Alice Reyes

(the founder of Ballet Philippines). Although Imelda Marcos expected the company to cater to her whims, Ballet Philippines had sufficient autonomy to accommodate them while continuing to develop its own highly innovative and independent artistic vision.

The second phase was ushered in by the 1986 Revolution that brought the Aquino administration into power. During this time Ballet Philippines was given the role of promoting the nationalism that the Revolution had engendered. However, little financial support was forthcoming from the state.

The third phase has been one of financial constraints, and the relative decline of the company as an artistic force. Although the pattern may be reversed now that Denisa Reyes (sister of Alice Reyes) has become the artistic director of Ballet Philippines, the effort to rebuild this company is likely to encounter difficulties. The problem of paying dancers sufficient monies to support themselves will need to be overcome if Ballet Philippines is to train and retain high quality dancers, especially male dancers. And this will require considerable patronage by philanthropic and corporate sponsors or by the state (Wulff 1998, 54).

We shall elaborate somewhat on the factor of personalistic patronage (associated with phase one), nationalistic ideology (which came to the fore in phase two), and the integration of the Philippines within the world market economy (which characterizes phase three).

First, when the Marcos regime was overthrown, "high culture" in the

Philippines no longer had the First Lady as a patron. She had been, whatever her reasons, very committed to promoting this type of cultural activity. Her sponsorship resulted in high visibility for the company, and it facilitated fund raising. The endorsement by the First Lady meant that the political and economic elite was more likely to be involved in supporting ballet as an art form. When the patronage of Imelda Marcos vanished, the support for the company dwindled over time.

The case of Ballet Philippines underscores the difficulties of institutionalizing personalistic patronage of the arts. Institutionalization provides legitimacy for the funding by philanthropic or corporate groups or by the state. For a company like Ballet Philippines, which is located in a society where "high culture" has not been given the legitimacy of institutionalization, personalistic patronage becomes a critical factor in its survival. However, personalistic patronage in developing societies is likely to be transitory.

Second, there was an ideological shift in the nation as a result of the 1986 Revolution. This was supposedly a democratizing revolution of "people power" whereby, in the ideal, elitism of any sort was no longer acceptable. This realignment of the power structure redefined the nation's priorities. This shift from an authoritarian government to a more democratic one focused national energy on redressing what were perceived as the inadequacies of the previous regime. The latter had done little or nothing to alleviate the mass poverty that had plagued the country. This shift in focus, which was fundamentally political in nature,



had repercussions not only for the economic agenda but also for all other sectors of society.

In the case of Ballet Philippines, the ascent of the Aquino government called for more nationalistic themes in the programs. However, the very concept of ballet carries with it connotations of elitism. Zolberg (1996, 397), a sociologist, argues that given the association of the fine arts with the elite, these activities seem out of keeping with democracy. While the ideological shift in the political climate in the Philippines pushed the arts in general to the background, Ballet Philippines was possibly more affected than other art forms.

While the change in political ideology made it appropriate for other dance companies to challenge the position of Ballet Philippines, it was the loss of Imelda Marcos's political patronage that made this possible. Ballet Philippines became susceptible to struggles within the CCP itself and found

itself competing with other groups for diminished resources. The company was unable to resist these incursions for very long.

As Ballet Philippines entered its third phase, it was called to compete for resources within the context of an increasingly global, market-driven economy which includes a global entertainment component that is capable of making considerable money even in a developing nation. Ballet Philippine's problems in attracting male dancers by paying them sufficient salaries are symptomatic of this situation. Undoubtedly new opportunities for innovation are possible on the part of the leadership of the ballet company (including the support by the new monied elite of Southeast Asia), and these innovations are likely to bring about a revitalization of the ballet company. But just how the ballet company will be reconstituted within the context of the world economy as well as the current political structure of the Philippines is difficult at the present time.

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup>The interview with Alice Reyes was conducted on 11 August 2001 in Manila.

<sup>3</sup>See Appendix for synopsis.

<sup>4</sup>Itim-Asu (*The Onyx Wolf*) is a ballet of Ms. Moreno's play which is based on

Father Jose Burgos' "La Loba Negra." It tells of the assassination of Spanish Governor General Bustamante who was a sworn enemy of the corruptors of the Galleon Trade. The murder spurs a blood bath among the friars at the hands of the vengeful widow with the help of her faithful servant, his son, and her daughter (Cultural Center of the Philippines 1980).

<sup>5</sup>Translation: "Review/Reconsider."

<sup>6</sup>Translation: "Homage to the Nation."

<sup>7</sup>Translation: "Now."

<sup>8</sup>Translation: "You Begin."

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## APPENDIX

Ballet Philippines Program of *Portraits of the Filipina* performed at the CCP Main Theater on November 5-7, 1987.

### FOR THE GODS

Choreography: Denisa Reyes

Music: Fabian Obispo

Synopsis: The women of the tribe celebrate the age-old rite of birth and sacrifice in a passionate union which affirms the female principle of life in community.

### PORTRAITS

Choreography: Edna Vida

Music: Nicanor Abelardo

Synopsis: A young girl identifies with different Filipinas in three paintings. She imagines the stories behind each portrait depicting familiar roles of a Filipina. In the end she recognizes and corrects the flaws in each woman by re-arranging their positions and hopes that for herself, she can shape her life the same way.

### AMADA

Choreography: Alice Reyes

Music: Lucrecia Kasilag

Synopsis: In the Philippines, Spanish Catholicism was absorbed and mixed with local pagan rites and rituals. One of the more primitive ones was that of the "Tatarin" which was practiced once a year during the summer solstice at the Feast of Saint John. It was a Dionysian festival where women reigned supreme for three days and the men who participated could do so by wearing some female garb as a symbol of subservience. The rest of the year, the man of the household was absolute master. Amada tells the story of an upper class couple in the 18th century Philippines, Don Rafael and Doña Amada, whose lives were forever altered by the Tatarin.

### 1890-1980

World Premiere

Choreography: Brando Miranda

Music: Ryan Cayabyab

### MGA BABAE

World Premiere

Choreography: Alice Reyes

Music: Inang Laya