

# Transnational Stages: Prospectus for a Filipino American Theater

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*The Philippine-ness of a given cultural form would seem to vary in shade and tonal values, depending on whether it fulfills one, two or all of the following criteria: (1) that it reflect Filipino culture, (2) that it answer the need of Filipinos at a given time, and 3) that it works for the good of the many*

—Tiongson in Patajo-Legasto 1998, 2

Indigenous Philippine drama was community-based and oriented. In it all found identity and consolidation with the community; in it were performers and audience, with no boundaries in-between them (Fernandez 1981, xvii).

The combination of indigenous and foreign dramatic and theatrical traditions in early modern Filipino drama was an acculturation process. In the final analysis, the resultant dramatic form expressed the language, situations, ideals, aspirations, sentiments, class conflicts, moral and social values, artistic tastes and nationalistic pride of Filipinos (Hernandez 1976, 195).

Conceived in the nineteenth-century revolution for Philippine independence, born into an American imperialist experiment, and raised thus far by neocolonial partnerships between the Philippines and the United States which share joint custody of its transnational citizens, Filipino American communities now on the cusp of the twenty-first century still struggle to articulate their complex histories and identities.<sup>1</sup> Filipino immigrants to Hawai'i and the mainland (at first students, then eventually predominantly male, agricultural laborers) numbered in the thousands in the early 1910s through the 1920s. This number grew exponentially after the United States Immigration Act of 1965, which liberalized the immigration of children and families, ushering in up to 40,000 Filipinos per year from the late 1970s to the early 1980s. According to the 1990 census, there were 1.4 million Filipino Americans in the United States, half of whom were living in California, and comprising this state's largest Asian/Pacific Islander population (Alegado

2001, 18; Espiritu 1995, 19). By the end of the 1990s, about 2.4 million Filipino Americans were recorded living in the United States, a population whose growth will be hastened by the immigration of an estimated one million more individuals over the next two decades (Alegado 1999, 43; 2000, 19).

Still, both despite and because of the significant presence they have established in at least five generations of increasing immigration, settlement, and community development, Americans of Filipino descent continue to: (1) confront diversities within the population (such as differences in cultural and economic assimilation); and (2) negotiate issues of racial, ethnic, and national identity in the wider context of contemporary American society. These challenges are exacerbated by the fact that Philippine and Filipino American studies are marginalized almost to the point of nonexistence in American education, except in rare university ethnic studies curricula. Without a history, an identity is very difficult to define. The purpose of this article is to suggest ways in which theater artists, particularly artists of Filipino ancestry, may make Philippine and Filipino American studies accessible to their communities through the creation and production of culturally distinct theatrical representation and, by doing so, contribute to the ongoing process of defining self- and group identity.

Historically, Filipino American communities have established strategies and mechanisms for dealing with these issues. Mutual aid societies, church groups, labor unions, charity and professional organizations, political activist coalitions and student clubs have been present in all generations of the Filipino American experience. These organizations seek to preserve aspects of native Filipino cultures, as well as to help individuals to survive and succeed in the United States. Many of these organizations include cultural and performing arts in their social activities such as Filipino folkloric dancing and traditional music, often performed in the same program with contemporary European- and African-American forms of dance and music. Since the 1970s, commonly found on many college campuses with active Filipino student organizations is the "Philippine Culture Night," or "PCN"—a revue-format program of skits, songs, and dances organized and performed by first-, second-, and third-generation Filipino Americans. Amateur and professional folkloric dance troupes perform a repertoire of Philippine traditional and ethnic dances from different regions of the archipelago. Annual festivals are celebrated in many North American cities for holidays such as Philippine National Day in June. Organizations regularly present beauty pageants and debutante cotillions in honor of the idealized Filipina.

What has not been established among these cultural representations is an identifiably Filipino American tradition of original playwriting or dramatic performance beyond the PCN or folkloric recital. Because there is relatively little scholarship and teaching of Philippine ethnic and traditional forms of theatrical performance, in the Philippines itself and even less so in the United States, Filipino artists and audiences alike tend to discard the possibilities of drawing upon their own traditions in favor of Eurocentric dramatic aesthetics and conventions. This cultural self-denial is unfortunate, for the diversity of Philippine performance traditions—from indigenous rituals to Spanish-influenced *sarsuwelas* to modern plays in various vernacular languages and dialects—are evidence of a rich cultural heritage that should be a source of pride, historical education, and empowerment to Filipino American communities.<sup>2</sup>

#### PHILIPPINE THEATER AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

If these communities, as previously stated, were conceived in the Philippine revolutionary period bridging the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, then the dramatic works of the time are valuable documentation of the dynamic beginnings of the Filipino American experience. Members of the Propagandist Movement of the

1890s, in resistance to Spanish colonialism, helped to develop a distinct nationalist culture out of the diversity of numerous indigenous ethno-linguistic groups that have survived physical and ideological subjugation. The upper class, educated Propagandists, came predominantly from the Tagalog-speaking elite of the lowland areas of the island of Luzon. Although influenced by their own regional and class prejudices, their newspapers, poetry, novels, and plays helped to spread the revolutionary spirit that in 1898 declared the first independent republic in Asia. When the United States entered and won the Spanish-American War in the same year, with the aid of anti-Spanish Filipino soldiers under Gen. Emilio Aguinaldo on the Manila front, Philippine nationalists at first believed that they had found an ally to support their fledgling democracy. The United States, however, proved to be another ambitious colonial ruler when, without the representation of any Filipino delegation, it signed the Treaty of Paris with Spain in 1898, transferring the entire Philippine archipelago to American ownership for the purchase sum of \$20 million.

The inheritors of the Propagandist legacy soon shifted the focus of their protest from the Spanish to the Americans. Filipino playwrights at the turn of the twentieth century, in counterpart to their compatriots waging armed resistance against the United States military forces, voiced

their anticolonial convictions on the theatrical stage. Their plays helped to form "an expression of resistance to colonial rule and a reflection of the social and cultural conditions during the first decade of the American occupation of the Philippines" (Hernandez 1976, 85).

The Americanization of Philippine peoples and institutions began almost immediately as William Howard Taft assumed the civil governorship of the Philippines in July 1901. This new colonial government, in the form of the Philippine Commission, was "challenged to devise a durable government that would command the loyalty and support of the Filipinos by channeling the nationalism of that society into the constructive tasks of social, political, and economic development" (Golay 1997, 75). By November, the commission had passed Act 292, the Sedition Law that defined and prohibited "a range of activities associated with treason, insurrection, and sedition" (ibid., 77). Section 10 of this act eventually became the basis for the arrest, trial, and imprisonment of so-called seditious playwrights:

Sec. 10. Until it has been officially proclaimed that a state of war or insurrection against the authority or sovereignty of the United States no longer exists in the Philippine Islands, it shall be unlawful for any person to advance orally or by writing or printing of like methods, the independence of the [Philippines] or their separation

from the United States whether by peaceable or forcible means, or to print, publish or circulate any ... publication, advocating such independence or separation (Guwara 1964 in Hernandez 1976, 82).

Filipino playwrights such as Severino Reyes, Juan Abad, Juan M. Cruz, and Aurelio Tolentino (a former writer for the Propagandist newspaper *La Solidaridad*), defied the Sedition Law, daring to publish and perform plays that the Americans claimed were "meant to inculcate a spirit of hatred and enmity against the American people and the Government of the United States in the Philippines, and ...incite the people of the Philippine islands to open and armed resistance." (Fernandez 1996, 95). These playwrights suffered arrest, trial, and imprisonment for their plays, which indigenized various European theatrical conventions (Spanish *zarzuelas*, realism, proscenium staging, written two- to three-act verse plays) with local dialects, revolutionary symbolism and allegorical characters. Philippine theater scholar Amelia La Peña-Bonifacio details some of the arrests of not only the playwrights, but also in some instances, of entire casts, directors, technicians, and audiences members, and the confiscation of props and scenery:

Within two weeks [of May 1903], four arrests (two in Manila, one each in Malabon and Batangas) have been made on plays, which

were conclusively anti-American in sentiments. It later became apparent that beyond the knowledge and reach of the law were numerous other plays being staged in bamboos, or suburbs, which were continually packed with Filipinos who shouted vivas [sic] every time independence was mentioned and who cheered the names of those who were in the forefront of struggle against the American military (La Peña-Bonifacio 1972, 24).<sup>3</sup>

Another Philippine historian argues that anticolonial sentiments "characterized the earliest manifestations of modern drama in the Philippines," and that "under the American regime... drama and theater became the strongest expression of resistance to American rule" (Hernandez 1976, 88). According to Hernandez, not only was theater developing as an art form in the Philippines, it was a vehicle for developing a national consciousness:

The realism of early modern [Philippine] plays consists less of a dramatic style than of an attitude born of the Revolution. A sense of national identity motivated early modern Filipino playwrights to utilize dramatic elements, which were recognizably Filipino: plots were set in the Philippines; they involved native characters; settings and costumes were distinctly local; the language of dialogue and

song was the vernacular. Whether truly profound or merely superficial, this realism constituted the underlying modernity of anti-colonialist plays (ibid., 89).

If these plays were so effective in the evolution of a Philippine national identity and performance aesthetic nearly one hundred years ago, then they conceivably could be a valuable model for the development of a history, identity, and cultural art form for contemporary Filipino America. They bear such provocative titles as *Abad's Ang Tanikalang Guinto (The Golden Bracelet)*; *Cruz's Hindi Ako Patay (I Am Not Dead)*; *Tolentino's Kahapon, Ngayon, at Bukas (Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow)*; and *Kala-yaang Hindi Natupad (The Freedom that has not Been Obtained)*, author unknown). Doreen G. Fernandez, a Philippine theater historian from the Ateneo de Manila University, articulates the advantages for maintaining knowledge of these historical playwrights and their work:

The contemporary Filipino can only feel pride—in Abad, Tolentino, Cruz, their contemporaries and successors in later years; in the revolutionary spirit courage of protest in Philippine dramatic tradition and history that was only the first in a continuing saga of nationalist, committed theater that survives to this day (Fernandez 1998, 56–57).

According to University of Hawai'i Philippine Studies professor Dean T. Alegado, "Culturally rooted social networks and institutions may prove to be assets in the [Filipino American] community's striving for economic and political power in the 21st century" (Lee n.d., 14). Because, of the effects of colonization, immigration, and acculturation, there are relatively few opportunities for Filipino Americans, even in educational institutions, to learn about their culturally specific histories. Filipino families and communities that now form significant populations throughout the United States assume, consciously or subconsciously, the responsibility for their own cultural education; that is, the maintenance and teaching of Filipino languages, customs, traditional foods, spiritual beliefs, folklore, historical knowledge, and artistic expression. This cultural education then, should be a deliberate process in which Filipino American theater artists and educators bridge the gap between the often insulated, elitist worlds of art and academe, and that of the people who form their communities.

#### NEW STAGES IN DEVELOPING A FILIPINO AMERICAN THEATER

The emphasis on local communities continues to shape Asian American theatrical performance even when theaters seek to appeal to a broader, racially mixed audience. In some sense Asian American theaters avoid stagnation because they are

pressured to speak to local concerns, respond directly to political events, and deal with changing demographics. Asian American theaters are forced to cope with new questions about the nature of individual and collective identity; thus the many different ways in which "Asian American" can be conceived provide a tension that drives theater practice (Lee n.d., 14).

"Filipino" could substitute for the term "Asian" in the above passage from Josephine Lee's book *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage*. Within established Asian American theaters, anthologies of Asian American plays, and books on Asian American theater history, however, there is relatively little inclusion of work by or about Filipinos. This marginalization clearly demonstrates a need for the development of a theatrical representation and practice specific to Filipino Americans. Artists and communities should build coalitions to support: (1) training in performance skills; (2) cultural/historical research and playwriting; and (3) the creation of new works relevant to local and current issues facing Filipino American communities in all of their diversity.

#### Performing Arts Training for Community Building: The Sinag- tala Theater Project Model

One of the foundations of a strong theater tradition is training. Middle-class Filipino families on either side of the Pacific commonly encourage

their children to take up lessons in European classical piano, American popular music, ballet, and tap dance. Some Filipino youth also join local dance troupes to learn traditional folk dances that were staged and popularized by the internationally known Bayanihan Dance Company of the Philippines. As in many American families, however, parents prefer that these artistic endeavors remain extracurricular activities, second to the mainstream subjects of study. While the enrollment of Filipino American college and university students in humanities, social science, and ethnic studies programs may be growing, most continue to enter the more traditional fields of business, law, or medicine. The Filipino Americans who pursue careers as actors, dancers, or singers constantly struggle with the racial barriers constructed and maintained by Hollywood, Broadway, and network and cable television. Lee confirms:

Although opportunities for Asian American actors have increased, even actors of a more recent generation—some of whom have distinguished themselves in striking and original portrayals—have subsequently found themselves once again relegated to theatrical invisibility in stereotypical roles (Lee n.d., 14).

This precarious nature of the performing arts field serves to discourage the professionalization of Filipino

American artists, especially those whose immigrant parents came to the United States precisely for better economic opportunities for their families.

A model for arts training and venues for performance, then, must be instituted in Filipino American communities and supported by their already-existing social, fraternal, and professional organizations. Members of these organizations, experienced in outreach, fund-raising, or grant writing, can contribute to the development process. At the vanguard for creating these training programs, however, should be those relatively few formally trained and professional Filipino American artists who may be seeking a creative outlet or experimental ground for new work. By setting up workshops and classes geographically in or near those neighborhoods with high populations of Filipino Americans, these artists, by providing a service toward the cultural education of the community as a whole, can build symbiotic relationships with the organizations who help support them.

Since 1990, at least one organization has encouraged the growth of the performing arts as a family- and community-based Filipino American institution. The Sinag-tala Theater Project of the Philippine National Day Association is supported by local Filipino organizations and businesses, small private grants and donations, as well as more substantial public grants

from the California Arts Council and the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission. Sinag-tala, a nonprofit organization based in Sacramento, California, serves the surrounding community by giving free theater and performing arts training to all interested individuals and families, regardless of racial background. This training serves mainly those who are not reached by mainstream performing groups due to cultural and other barriers. Participants learn and experience music, dance, and theater concepts through the works of Filipino artists.<sup>4</sup>

Professionally trained and experienced first- and second-generation Filipino American artists serve as the basis for this training program by volunteering their services year-round. Alcide "Sonny" Alforque, founding producer and artistic director of Sinag-tala, is an alumnus of the University of the Philippines Diliman, in Quezon City, Philippines, where he graduated with a bachelor's degree in Speech and Drama. After immigrating to the United States in 1969, he found few professional opportunities for Asian actors, but continued to perform, write, and direct for community theaters in San Francisco and Sacramento. A longtime political and community activist, he, his wife Letty Taguas Alforque, and their daughter Angela-Dee (author of *Laya at the Crossroads* 2000), worked together in many aspects of the Filipino American community, and continue to work

together in the Sinag-tala program. Recently retired from a long career with the state of California, Alforque has dedicated himself to the development of the performing arts in the Sacramento Filipino community. His artistic vision is reflected in Sinag-tala's mission to:

- Open windows to the culture, history and experiences of Filipinos;
- Use the medium of theater to creatively share the musical, choreographic, dramatic and literary works of the Filipino artists;
- Provide a showcase for the artistic and performing talent of local Filipino Americans and others;
- Strive for high artistic standards;
- Offer artistic material and adopt an ethic which reflects the best of traditional Filipino family and community values, and gives the youth positive choices in life; and
- Challenge Filipino Americans to step beyond their ethnic boundaries so as to be seen, be heard, and become enriched in the broader multicultural arts community.<sup>5</sup>

The staff and performing ensemble of Sinag-tala are comprised predominantly of individuals and families of Filipino descent, many of whom are bi/multiracial and bi/multilingual. In many instances, immediate and extended families all participate



together in the process, from performing to fund raising to the design and construction of costumes, sets, and props. Associate director, resident choreographer and staff writer, Angela-Dee Alforque, received multi-disciplinary degrees in theater arts, social science, and history. She has also studied and performed locally, nationally and internationally as an actor, singer, and dancer. Letty T. Alforque, whose college degree is in business accounting and now works as a teacher, has served as the organization's treasurer and is now its costume coordinator as well as a performer. Mark Fabionar, a third-generation Filipino American poet, playwright, and professor of Asian American Studies at Sacramento City College, contributes and performs original material about Filipinos growing up and living in the United States. Resident Choreographer Ediel Butts started her career in the Philippines in ballet and folk dance, and danced as a member of the Bayanihan Dance Company. Musical Director Dee Pizarro, is a Sacramento native and a professional musician, arranger and composer trained in piano, guitar, several horn and woodwind instruments, as well as in the Philippine instruments such as the *banduria* and *kulintang*. Malou Carlos, formerly a professional singer and vocal coach in the Philippines, now serves as choral director and also performs with the group. Pizarro's three children, as well as Carlos's son and

daughter, have all appeared as cast members. Business Manager Efren Diaz, a full-time employee of the United States Postal Service and active member of the Filipino American Veterans Association, not only helps manage the finances and ticket sales, but has also performed on stage alongside his wife, Esther, and their two teenage sons.

Dr. Richard Ikeda, a Japanese American physician and executive director of the Health For All Adult Day Health Care Center, donates rehearsal space for Sinag-tala productions. In exchange for the free use of the center's activities room after business hours, Sinag-tala and affiliated organizations provide maintenance and construction work on the facility. Sinag-tala performers also occasionally provide volunteer services and entertainment for the Center's elderly and disabled patients.

One of Sinag-tala's greatest strengths, beyond its excellence as an artistic organization, is its function as an extended family. Participants often address each other using traditional titles of respect for family members such as "uncle," "auntie," "ate" (older sister) and "kuya" (older brother). Elders help young people with the phonetics of Filipino dialogue and song lyrics; parents assist with carpooling, meals, childcare, and fundraising; apprentice programs provide mentorships between members of the artistic staff and motivated longtime participants; emerging apprentices bring

in new energy and contemporary performing arts forms. Discipline and respect are greatly emphasized, as are the values of community responsibility and accountability. If a truly culturally specific Filipino American theater tradition is to be established, maintained, and taken seriously, both by its own members and those of the greater "multicultural arts community" in the United States, then the foundation of that theater must be built equally on artistic form *and* community function.

### **Dramatic Writing as a Contribution to Filipino American Historiography**

The institution of community-based training programs is essential to the beginnings of a Filipino American theater, yet there still remains the question of what to present onstage. Filipino American history holds countless stories with dramatic potential: contingents of immigrants including students, laborers, military men, "warbrides" and families; the development of the labor movement pioneered by Filipino farm-workers in the 1920s; region-specific experiences of Filipinos ranging from Hawai'i to Alaska to Kansas to Chicago to New York; the radical Filipino American student movements, leftist organizations and antimartial law campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s. One great challenge to overcome is the seeming absence of and/or accessibility to historically relevant material from which to draw inspi-

ration. Sucheng Chan, a leading Asian American historian, confirms:

Despite the steady progress in Asian American historical scholarship, significant gaps remain. The most glaring is the absence of book-length studies on Filipino Americans. The number of journal articles published in the last two decades on this group, compared to other Asian ethnic groups, is also very small, and both the quality of the scholarship and the topical coverage are uneven. The first analytical study of one aspect of Filipino American history has been written not by an historian or social scientist, but by a literary critic (Chan 1996, 397).

Original plays, based in and on historical events, can help to fill the "glaring absence" of Filipino American scholarship by dramatizing Filipino America as an ethnic minority group originally formed not in the United States but in the Philippines, as peoples of a former American colony whose descendants now inhabit both countries. *Laya at the Crossroads*, an original play written in 2000 by Angela-Dee Alforque as part of her master's thesis completed at California State University, Sacramento, serves as an example of the viability of developing Filipino American dramatic literature based on the tradition of the so-called seditious playwrights. *Laya*, (*laya* is a Tagalog word meaning "freedom" or "independence"), set in

the year 1900 during the American occupation, was originally written in the spring of 2000 as a one-act play for a course in beginning playwriting in the Department of Theater and Dance at CSUS. It was given a stage reading in the CSUS Studio Theater and awarded the departmental Jeffrey Award for Playwriting. The characters and plot, like those on which they are based, are rooted in the ideals of Philippine nationalism and resistance, and the play's female protagonist and various characters of both sexes also challenge issues of gender, race, and class. *Laya* is an attempt to analyze the beginnings of the (or at least a) Filipino American experience, and the consequences and advantages of that experience today. Written primarily in English and interspersed with some Tagalog phrases, as well as verses of a traditional Tagalog song of the revolutionary period, this work attempts to dramatize the Philippine-American war for Filipino American artists and audiences, who may or may not speak any Philippine languages, but who all probably have at the very least a working proficiency of English. Finally, the text and analysis of the play *Laya at the Crossroads* serves as evidence that Filipino Americans can and should look at these Philippine performance traditions to better understand their own histories, identities, and their own artistic potential.

A few teenage and young adult members of the Sinag-tala ensemble, who participated in a recent informal

reading of the two-act version of *Laya*, gave positive responses to the play's form and content. All of them second-generation Filipino Americans whose theater experiences range from participation in school and community shows to teaching in after-school arts programs, these young people seemed both excited and disturbed by some of the little known aspects of Philippine history addressed by the play. As aspiring artists, they conveyed a noticeable enthusiasm to read a play written by someone of their own community, and to come across certain ideas, speech patterns, and symbolism identifiable to them as "Filipino." Their curiosity inspired questions about the playwriting process, generated a discussion about the plot and characters, and prompted inquiries as to when and where the play might be staged.

One aspect of the play that seemed, on the one hand, to be problematic was the dense language and poetry that pervade the play. Their reading helped to reveal awkward passages, overbearing exposition, and unrealized assumptions about the play's ability to convey historical information. On the other hand, the inclusion of Tagalog phrases and figurative language helped the actors to see the potential of taking two of their community's languages, and creating a new and interesting theatrical language.

This reading demonstrated two important factors in writing for Filipino American spectators who have had

relatively little experience to theatrical or historical writing. First, if a playwright is to communicate effectively with an audience, then his or her language must be accessible enough to be understood across some differences in age, education, literacy, and historical knowledge. If an artist trained in Eurocentric literature, theatrical conventions, and cultural critique uses only the language of those academic worlds, then the relevancy of their work is obscured to more diverse communities. They may as well be writing and producing for the educated, middle-class Anglo-American audience who already participate in and maintain the dominant theater institutions.

At the same time, however, theater artists must not underestimate the Filipino American artists' or audience's sensibilities, assuming that a multigenerational immigrant population is too unsophisticated to "get it." The dialogue and ideas should be challenging enough to raise both the artists' and the audience's expectations of themselves in their participation in and creation of new cultural art forms. In addressing this challenge, Filipino American scholars and theater artists should bring together and/or consult with different members of their communities; both native speakers of Philippine languages who were raised and educated within the Philippine culture, and those who are native to or are longtime residents of the United States, and

can translate and share ideas relevant to a Filipino American audience. The Filipino American theatrical space can then, as Lee contends in regard to Asian American theater, "establish communities in which systems of meaning and significance can reinvent themselves" (Lee n.d., 22). With the richness of two diverse nations from which to draw, artists and their community members should collaborate on building new theatrical languages that participate equally in historiographical discourse, artistic experimentation and the development of Filipino American studies.

### **New Stages in the Representation of Contemporary Filipino American Issues and Identities**

Asian American theater is a relatively new concept if you think about it. We only go back twenty to thirty years, so we have all of those issues to work through—chief of which is the immigrant experience. It's their most immediate experience of all; growing up, family, generations, racism, gender. We have to get through that before we start getting into all the other iterations of American life. It takes a certain amount of maturity as a writer to hone in on the nitty gritty of relationships and look at other situations, and as we develop Asian American theater that [will] happen (Peña in Eng 1999, 416).

Theatrical writing and performance have the potential for expanding Filipino American studies beyond historical research to a critique of contemporary issues facing their communities. Royal F. Morales, who has taught in the ethnic studies department at UCLA, perceives the field of Filipino American studies as a "tool for social change," but yet an "unfinished agenda," because of the relative lack of research and reading materials addressing the Filipino American experience (Morales 1986-87, 124). Morales, like Chan, articulates the need for literary sources about Filipino Americans, and argues:

I had to...undergo the difficult steps of reading numerous materials, compiling references, arranging the syllabus, and putting together a reader for the course. ...[I] found that available articles were mostly about the "home" country, the Philippines, rather than about the American side of our experience. While there is a strong relationship between the "home" and the American experiences, it seems to me that it is in the latter area that more articles need to be written and research pursued.

Morales recommends that public universities institute formal courses in Filipino American studies that cover issues of civil rights, history, immigration, identity, and community,

as well as require students to participate in fieldwork in the local Filipino American community (ibid., 123). A theater of, by, and for local communities should be an integral part of, and connection between, the universities' theater and Asian or Filipino American studies programs. Their resources (students, staff, faculty, libraries, production facilities) could contribute to and benefit from the surrounding communities.

Morales's emphasis on the study of issues facing Filipino American today more importantly reveals the potential for even greater, more creative growth for a Filipino American artistic movement. Because of its reliance on the support of a community that is in many ways socially and religiously conservative (many Filipino Americans are Catholic or Protestant Christian), more radical topics have been criticized and, therefore avoided in theatrical representation. While training projects such as Sinag-tala focuses on building skills and strengthening communities, and historical playwriting may serve to educate audiences about people and events neglected by American historiography, contemporary issues and approaches must be examined and reflected in cultural performance forms. Contemporary European-, African-, and even other Asian American playwrights and performance artists have experimented with countless forms (Realism, Impressionism, Modernism, Post-Modernism)

on a varied menu of issues (feminism, racism, gay and lesbian identities, postcoloniality, postcolonial feminism, and others resulting in artistic permutations representative of many groups, disciplines, and lifestyles.

A Filipino American theater, whose communities are as socially, politically, economically, and sexually diverse as any other, must not be afraid to experiment with these genres or tackle these issues. Johanna Faith Almiron, second-generation Filipina American dancer, poet, and performance artist from New York, after reviewing the many readings and articles written about the assumingly lonely bachelor lives of the predominantly male immigrant labor population of the 1920s and 1930s, posed the question, "Doesn't it ever occur to anyone that some of them may have been gay?"<sup>6</sup> In fact, homosexual relationships are not addressed in the popular textbooks e.g., dealing with Asian and Filipino American history, and consequently they are left out of the discourse (Takaki 1998).

In the mid-1990s an "artists' collective" based in San Francisco, California, called DIWA Arts presented a performance art piece using a combination of gay camp and cross-dressing with traditional Filipino Catholic pageantry.<sup>7</sup> In an endeavor to break down stereotypes of a monolithic Filipino community, their piece entitled *Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo*

Attempt[ed] to offer a postcolonial perspective on spirituality in the

age of AIDS. By choosing to re-enact a Filipino version of this ritual—in which saints, drag queens, and beauty contestants comfortably share the same plane of transcendental ecstasy—DIWA reminds members of the Filipino American community how syncretic and sensually permissive their religion can be in the "motherland." While Roman Catholicism colonized and repressed pagan spiritual systems in the Philippines, it never erased their erotic power (Matthews 1998).

The creation and performance of the DIWA Arts piece is just one example of Filipino American artists struggling not only to define their place in American society, but also to critique the assumptions and prejudices that, at best, diversify and, at worst, marginalize certain segments of the Filipino American population. The Filipino American theater should address issues as contemporary and relevant to its audience (but "glaringly absent" from published literature) as bi/multiracial identities and interracial relationships, domestic and youth violence, AIDS, employment and housing discrimination, hate crimes, and the neocolonial political and economic relationships between the Philippines, the U.S. and other industrialized countries whose demand for cheap labor has created an international Filipino diaspora.<sup>8</sup> Through a medium of dramatic performance that draws from, deconstructs, and represents

Philippine performance traditions and innovations, Filipino American theater artists can create and maintain art forms vital to the survival of their communities.

## CONCLUSION

Theater is a site where people's history and experience are problematized, retrieved, and demonstrated. It is at theater where our cultural and ethnic identities are explored, where the notions of norms and hegemony are contested, and where we can reach the heart of people who are unknown to us through a magical encounter (Kurahashi 1999, 184).

In working to build a Filipino American theater, its artists must research their histories, above and beyond honing their skills as artists. They may do this by reading existing literature; attending ethnic- and nation-specific courses and conferences; studying various forms of indigenous and ethnic theater, music and dance; and then disseminating their discoveries by creating and producing original work. While striving for both historical accuracy and artistic innovation, these same artist/scholars must also be able to communicate with their general public, in a language and manner intelligible to their communities. They must use their art to bridge the gap between the contemporary *illustrados*, or intelligentsia, and the *tao*, or common folk, and envision their work as contributions to a larger body of Filipino

American historical scholarship. Most importantly, their theatrical practices must dissect the very idea of "Filipino American," a term that, "like any other indicator of individual and collective identity, must constantly question its own prejudices, exclusions, and hierarchies, and allow for change" (Lee n.d., 218). Nicanor G. Tiongson, theater scholar, cultural critic, and former artistic director of the Cultural Center of the Philippines in Manila, also emphasizes the importance of an ethnic specific, social-change agenda for Philippine theater:

There are plays... that do more than just mirror society. Such plays aim to answer particular needs felt by Filipinos or groups of Filipinos, at particular times in their historical development. Thus, most plays want to entertain their audiences. Others seek to expose the foibles, ills, and basic contradictions in society as well. But a select few do not stop at exposure of social conditions but would seek to exhort its audience to do something about these conditions. Clearly, the plays that aim to educate and move audiences to action are more intensely Philippine than those which merely answer the need to entertain.

...[W]hen that theater shall also have succeeded in advancing the interests of Filipino economic and political independence, then it shall have grown a little closer to the ideal of a Filipino national theater

(Tiongson in Patajo-Legasto 1998, 2, 19).

Filipinos in the United States, as transnational peoples possessing rich cultures and performance traditions from which to draw, certainly have

the potential and resources to meet these challenges and, in the creative process, discover their histories, define new identities and empower their communities through the development of a Filipino American theater.

## NOTES

1. For the purposes of this paper, the adjective "Philippine" generally refers to that which is native to any of the indigenous and/or traditional cultures of the archipelago and nation known as the Republic of the Philippines (*Republika ng Pilipinas*), i.e., history, culture, languages, and the like. "Filipino" refers to the people whose national identity was constructed within the Spanish and American colonial experiences, and which may be further deconstructed into various regional and language groups that comprise the Philippine nation (e.g. Tagalog, Ilocano, Visayan, and others). "Filipino American" signifies those Filipinos who immigrated to or were born in the United States, particularly those who identify culturally and linguistically with both of the Philippines and the United States.

2. The original Spanish spelling of this musical form is "zarzuela." However, due to the Philippine indigenization of Spanish language and culture, various spellings emerged, including "sarswela" and "sarsuwela."

3. Act 292 of 11-4-1901, sec. 10, in *Punishments under Law Passed*

by the Philippine Commission, 57th Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, S. Doc. 172, quoted in Golay, 77.

4. "About the Sinag-tala Theater Project," Sinag-tala 2000 Theatrical Revue promotional flier, September 2000.

5. "The Philippine National Day Association Sinag-tala Theater Project —Our Mission Statement." The Sinag-tala website. [cited 18 November 2000]; available from [http://members.tripod.com/sinag\\_tala/docs/mission/html](http://members.tripod.com/sinag_tala/docs/mission/html)

6. Johanna Faith Almiron, discussion with author, Philippine Field Studies course, University of Hawaii Manoa, July 2000.

7. "Diwa" is a Tagalog word meaning "spirit".

8. For an extended articulation of a "Filipino Diaspora," see Jonathan Y. Okamura, *Imagining the Filipino American Diaspora: Transnational Relations, Identities and Communities*, (New York and London: Garland Publishing Company, 1998), and E. San Juan, Jr., *From Exile to Diaspora: Versions of the Filipino Experience in America* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998).



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