



Reuters Institute Journalist Fellowship Paper

MACBETH BY CANDLELIGHT

*Protest theatre makes a comeback in the Philippines,
and art journalists dig in to interrogate the current moment*

By Mozart Pastrano
Journalist Fellow 2018-19 (Michaelmas term)

May 2019

Sponsor: Columbia University

Acknowledgements

This paper owes a huge debt to Meera Selva, Director of the Journalism Fellowship Programme, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford. She saw how art journalism differs from other forms of journalism and gave me the freedom to write not the usual research paper but a longform essay. It may meander through cultural criticism and history, narrative and exposition, the lyrical and the symbolic, the personal and the political, London and Oxford and Manila and New York—but it cannot do away with the discipline of the research paper. It would still posit an argument, be grounded on research and facts, provide a fresh insight into the media landscape in the fast-changing world of today, and embrace dissenting opinion. For this, I thank Dr. Chris Westcott, my academic supervisor, who served as a guiding light.

This paper would not have been possible, of course, if not for the work of the art journalists whose bylines appear at the Philippine Daily Inquirer, specifically, Gibbs Cadiz, Cora Llamas, Amadis Ma. Guerrero, Pablo Tariman, and Walter Ang—under the aegis of the lifestyle editor Thelma Sioson San Juan.

My most profuse gratitude to the following for the assistance they provided in the ideation, research, writing, and revisions of this paper: the playwright Rody Vera, the actor Madz Nicolas, and the directors Dennis Marasigan, Nanding Josef, and Nestor Horfilla, all of whom are well-regarded prime movers in Philippine theatre today; the dance artist and creator Ea Torrado; my former media colleagues Ruffa Vigilante, Ronni Masayda, Gina Tabonares, and Raymond Burgos; my friends Happy Ballesteros-Raagas, Raine Fenton, Denise Mordeno Aguilar, Neil Pagalaran, Simonette Sagara, and Belle Bondoc-Roberto; my Laspiñas cousins Nick and Junafaye, Nilo and Ann, and Marc and Arlene; and the cultural critics Patrick D. Flores, Romulo Baquiran Jr., and D.M. Reyes, my former fellows at the Young Critics Circle.

But first and foremost, thanks to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and to the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University for considering me as a journalist-fellow for the Michaelmas term of 2018.

■ SOMETHING WICKED this way comes, as Shakespeare's Globe began its winter season by staging *Macbeth* by candlelight. Yes, by mere candlelight—no electric stage lighting of any sort. Actors held candles and torches. Candlewick-trimmed metal chandeliers glimmered fitfully as they dangled above the stage. At some point, votive candles appeared at the edge of the thrust stage and became footlights. In the ambiguous dark licked by these flickering flames, the seamless ensemble performance brought Shakespeare's words to life seemingly matter-of-factly, without distracting directorial flamboyance. This fragile play of light and shadows plunged the theatre into a hazy, hypnotic chiaroscuro that conjured what may be a crucial lurking presence not stated in the script: darkness. When Macbeth mutters as his ambition starts to get the better of him, "Let not light see my black and deep desires," the line whispered by the riveting actor Paul Ready bounced off like a phantasm in the shape-shifting dark. And there, just like that, by palpably conveying the idea that evil thrives in darkness, this candle-lit production indicated how the arts, if not shrewd artists and other art denizens, can interrogate the current moment: subtly, and yet with sly devastating resonance.

At the post-theatregoing dinner hosted by the British journalist Meera Selva a few steps away from Shakespeare's Globe, I mentioned my evil-and-darkness takeaway with Yahoo News's Kadia Tubman. She right away flagged me on *The Washington Post's* masthead kicker, "Democracy Dies in Darkness." Then I recalled the bold pronouncement of the newspaper editor Joseph Pulitzer III: "We will illuminate dark places and, with a deep sense of responsibility, interpret these troubled times." The idea, I suppose, is that we illuminate, and thereby eliminate, the dark by setting it ablaze with the flames of truth. Which brings us to the house ad of *The New York Times*. "The truth is hard. The truth is hidden. The truth must be pursued... The truth is necessary... The truth is powerful. The truth is under attack. The truth is worth defending... The truth is more important now than ever."

In this light, this winter production of *Macbeth*—with a topnotch cast that included Michelle Terry, the Globe's new artistic director who is apparently turning her back on modern-day stagings, and Joseph Marcell (of *Cry Freedom* fame) as Duncan and the Porter, under the bewitching direction of Robert Hastie; live eerie soundscape created by three singers and percussionists headed by Laura Moody; and now-you-see-me-now-you-don't lighting guided by the candle consultant Paul Russell—managed to thrust itself into the glorious summer of our world's current discontent.

The design for the candle-lit indoor theatre at the Shakespeare's Globe, the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, was based on two 17th-century drawings that, in the 1960s, slipped out of the pages of a book at the University of Oxford. As it happened, I was in residence at Oxford when I watched *Macbeth* at the playhouse two hours away by train. I was among the academic year's journalist-fellows at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, under the ambit of the university's Department of Politics and, for us fellows, also of Green Templeton College, on Woodstock Road. I was the only art journalist among the fellows, but I gamely sat it out as we discussed breaking news ("churnalism," facts vs. speed, new media ecosystems), misinformation, shiny new things in journalism, transformations in news organisations, and the visual politics of war and conflict, among others. I found myself furiously taking notes during a class lecture on "Everything Leaks: An International Analysis of Digital Whistleblowing Platforms Adoption in Journalism," by the Italian media scholar Philip Di Salvo.

When Rasmus Nielsen, the director of the Institute, perturbed us with his argument on why journalism as we know it is dying and why such is necessary, he mentioned something that gained the force of prescience when I watched *Macbeth* a few days later. He said that a popular ideology-slash-fantasy of newspaper journalism is that journalism is about seeking the truth and helping people understand the world. But, he asked, what is the value in that? What does it matter to the readers? How does it enrich

their lives? This contention that ideals-slash-values are rendered meaningless unless they are bundled up with personal interest haunted me as I tried to sort out the bloodbath in the haphazard darkness of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse.

But Nielsen wrapped up his hour-long, sit-down talk—a brilliant anomaly without the usual multimedia presentation, complimentary book copies, or handouts—by offering a suggestion. Perhaps journalism will maintain its relevance in our rapidly changing world if it continues to provide the sense that the world makes sense.

And so one morning, I woke up earlier than usual, quite an accomplishment in the wintry gloom of Oxford when the sun seems to wake up, if at all, just before noon. I hopped on a double-decker bus, got off on Broad Street, and walked briskly until I was in the maze of cobblestone alleys that lead to book shops and hole-in-the-wall cafes and stone-block archways coaxing you to slip inside some ancient college in the oldest university in the English-speaking world. At a narrow lane that whisked me off to a James Bond movie and a Harry Potter installment both at the same time, I rang the door of Oxford Analytica. My academic supervisor, the exacting Chris Westcott, was a director there and had extended an invitation to its legendary daily brief. This took place at the top floor of the wood-and-glass walk-up building, where a select group of academics, analysts, and public intellectuals ignored the breakfast fare before them as they tried to make sense of the world at the start of day.

The expert on Russia, a thin man with a quiet voice, disclosed how the key businessmen in Russia were really running the show there and how they were looking for just about any excuse to invade the Ukraine yet again. The honourably dressed men and women huddled about the round table spoke up all at once, to confirm or dispute his assessment, and to discuss its implications on the global stage. The most vocal of them, a robust man as exuberant as a Hollywood star, began the discussion on the Americas. He was laying out top-secret information and analysis about Julian Assange and the Trump Administration, but I was distracted by a tall, silver-haired man with the benevolent air of Hogwarts's Albus Dumbledore who went around offering to pour out a fresh brew of coffee from a thermos stainless steel carafe, saying, "Go on, go on. This is why I started these breakfast briefings, so we can face the day ahead with a fresh handle on the world." The expert on Southeast Asia was put through on the speaker phone. He cautioned that while the merger of two political factions in Malaysia may be seen as a game changer, ethnic tensions will persist as a crucial divisive issue. He also reported that with the appointment of a new chief justice in the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte appeared to have consolidated his power-hold on all branches of the government.

To seize a handle on the world, Macbeth turns to the visceral forecasts of the witches. They give him a sense of *his* world. They embolden him about his place in it. Their ululating bird-shrieks at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse intimated that they are free spirits wielding their belligerence to tap into the currents of people's discontents and desires, reading signs in the unknowable dark and depths and facing the coming day by brewing a fresh handle on it—and thus making it known, navigable, theirs. Armed with the power of knowledge, Lady Macbeth exults, "Thy letters have transported me beyond/ This ignorant present, and I feel now/ The future in the instant."

In that instant, I was not just a journalist-fellow. I was a journalist-fellow from the Philippines. The candles at the playhouse sputtered with the weight of the words tossed in the dark:

*Alas, poor country!
Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot*

*Be called our mother, but our grave, where nothing,
But who knows nothing, is once seen to smile;
Where sighs and groans and shrieks that rend the air
Are made, not marked; where violent sorrow seems
A modern ecstasy. The dead man's knell
Is there scarce asked for who, and good men's lives
Expire before the flowers in their caps,
Dying or ere they sicken.*

I have never imbibed *Macbeth* this way, even though I had previously seen other versions of the play when I was reviewing Manila's theatre scene for the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. Chris Millado, currently the artistic director at the Cultural Center of the Philippines, did a *Makbet* at the experimental theatre at the basement. I was so hypnotized by the whirl of costumes and choreography that I called it "a trance-like traipse through tragedy: the madness of machination and manipulation in metaphors of motion and meditation."

In my review, I took note of "the aesthetics of Zen economy, such as the use of sand to evoke water and blood as well the use of accordion paper fans to denote various props and states of being." Even now, I consider the imagery of this production indelible and intense: "the various well-sculpted entrance movements signifying horseback-riding and skirmishes in battle; the Gandhian image of a sage forewarning events while squatting on the floor, spinning a prayer 'wheel'; the witty dance-chants of the witches; the spectacularly grisly coronation scene, where the murdered king is [held aloft, lifeless, and unceremoniously] stripped of his crown and symbolic accouterments; and [Edna] Vida's Lady Macbeth vigorously cleansing her guilt-stained hands while bathed in the cinematic light (actually, a video projection from above) of a volcanic eruption."

Millado used the elegant Filipino translation by Rolando Tinio, the National Artist for both Literature and Theatre. Tinio himself played the title role in a *Makbet* he directed, at the Metropolitan Theatre in Manila, when it was already past its heyday. I thought this production was "mesmerizing in its austere purity and high-minded eloquence, with just the right ethereal music, from *Swan Lake* I think it was." I intuited lofty nastiness in Tinio's Señor Makbet, recalling "the time Tinio performed Caligula in the nude, and he was distracted by two schoolgirls in the front row who were giggling silly. He jumped off the Met's stage, slapped the girls one after the other, and leapt back onstage to pick up where he left off."

Tinio's company, *Teatro Pilipino* (Philippine Theatre), a vanguard of Western theatre done in Filipino, was the main drama company at the Cultural Center during the time of Imelda Marcos, who built it. (For this project, the American government gave the Marcos government \$3.5 million from the war damage fund for education approved by the U.S. Congress.) When her husband was ousted from power and Corazon Aquino became the Philippine President, Teatro Pilipino was replaced by a new resident theatre company named *Tanghalang Pilipino* (Philippine Stage). Its founding artistic director was Nonon Padilla, one of the notable directors of the Philippine Educational Theatre Association, which helped fan the flames of political dissent against the Marcos regime through its cultural work. Padilla did his own take of *Makbet* for the emergent Tanghalang Pilipino and I wrote: "With the soldiers wearing military fatigues and Lady Macbeth descending in Imeldific splendor on the CCP's red carpet flowing down the spiral stairs for the coronation scene, this production was a dig at the diabolical culture of contemporary Philippine politics: conjugal dictatorship, political assassinations, coup plots, Machiavellian maneuverings—all driven by blatant, unquenchable greed. Superbly stirring!"

Who would have thought there would be a resurgence of anti-martial law, anti-dictatorship plays in the Philippines under the Duterte presidency?

In May 23, 2017, a month before marking his first year in office, Duterte declared martial law in the southern Philippine island of Mindanao, where generations in Davao City know him as the city mayor. (He began as an OIC vice mayor in 1986 and 1987 and was, from 2010 to 2013, vice mayor to Mayor Sara Duterte, his daughter. Some senators have just endorsed her for the next presidential election, in 2022.) Duterte imposed martial law on the day the military attacked the Islamic city of Marawi in northern Mindanao to flush out an armed Muslim group said to be setting up an Islamic caliphate there under the influence of ISIS.

Marcos used a similar reason—the Muslim uprising in Mindanao—when he placed the entire country under martial law in 1972. Amnesty International offers these chilling numbers: martial law during the Marcos years imprisoned 70,000 citizens, tortured 34,000, and killed 3,240. Torture came in many forms. Men and women critical of the regime were electrocuted with live wires, beaten up with wood and rods, strangled, burned with flat irons or cigarettes. Some underwent what we now know as water boarding. Many women prisoners were stripped naked and raped; various objects were forced into their genitals. These are evoked with damning intensity in Chris Millado's *Buwan at Baril (Moon and Gun) in E b Major*, a suite of eight monologues, a must-watch among people in the know during the final years of the Marcos dictatorship which has enjoyed a much-talked-about revival in Duterte's presidency.

Cora Llamas, a long-time theatre critic for the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, began her [review](#) of this revival by indicating that the target audience of this production had to be “millennials who did not live through that era.” She continued, “To that end, it offers a stark presentation of what it meant to live under a brutal dictatorship, summoning the martial law years through the stories of representative men and women of that period who took a stand and paid a heavy price for it.” She weighed in on the performances of the cast, some of whom are name-droppables in Philippine cinema and television. Llamas's piece, honored as among the “Editors' Picks” in the *Inquirer's* online edition, ended with an undeniable jab at the present-day political landscape: “The last image is of [popular film actress Cherry Pie] Picache's grieving widow—a reminder of the grievances still unaddressed, and the larger unfinished business of martial law.”

Playwright Bonifacio Ilogan, a student activist who was tortured by the Marcos militia, lambasted martial law in his *Pagsambang Bayan (Nation's Worship)* a year after he was released from jail. A mobile production using *dula-tula* (theatre-poetry) stylistics and what theorists at the Art Studies Department at the University of the Philippines in Diliman termed “the aesthetics of poverty,” it was a mainstay crowd-drawer during rallies against the Marcos dictatorship, performed in the streets and community halls.

I saw it in a cafeteria at U.P. Diliman. The play follows the arc, if not architecture, of the Mass. Jesus Christ becomes Juan de la Cruz, the Filipino everyman, who is forced to carry the cross of high prices, foreign debt, military abuses, unemployment, unaffordable education, and social injustice, among others. The Gospel reading is the Parable of the Good Samaritan, encouraging its audiences that to be a neighbor is to both bear witness to the conditions of the time and act with compassion, courage, and commitment. In the theatre season after Duterte placed Mindanao under martial law, Ilogan's street-theatre masterpiece was updated as a musical, with 25 songs by Jed Balsamo and Lucien Letaba, under the direction of the multi-awarded film director Joel Lamangan.

“Essentially, the play encourages the audience to look back at the past and how it impacts on the present,” the playwright said in an interview with Amadis Ma. Guerrero, a familiar byline in the *Inquirer’s* arts sections. In his [article](#), Guerrero quoted Ilagan without any trepidation: “We have retained the allusions to martial law. Much has remained the same. But we now have critiques of the Marcos burial, extrajudicial killings, the comeback of the Marcoses, and the threat of martial law under the Duterte administration.”

The *Inquirer’s* theatre editor, Gibbs Cadiz, wrote about a festival of new plays in a piece cheekily titled “‘Never again’: 9 plays remember that martial law ‘thingy’.” It began, “Give artists a good cause for creative ferment, and they’ll go to town with it. Consider *Never Again: Voices of Martial Law*, the festival of nine one-act plays delving into that dark period in the country’s history, running on its last weekend at the auditorium of the little-known *Bantayog ng mga Bayani* (Heroes’ Memorial) in Quezon City. Spurred by the government’s plan to bury the dictator Ferdinand Marcos at the *Libingan ng mga Bayani* (Heroes’ Cemetery), theatre artists decided to add their voice to the public outrage in the best way they knew how: by using the stage to recall the trauma and terror of those times, and thus stand against the tide of historical revisionism.”

When he was elected president in 2016, Rodrigo Duterte was vocal about how he would rather have, as vice president, not the elected Leni Robredo but Bongbong Marcos, the ex-president’s son who lost to Robredo. Duterte [publicly admits](#) owing a debt of gratitude to the Marcoses for their support to him and his candidacy. Despite public uproar, he went on to allow the remains of Ferdinand Marcos to be interred in the hallowed ground reserved for Philippine heroes. A few months later, Duterte declared martial law in Mindanao.

Friends of Duterte’s mother, Soledad, are perplexed by Duterte’s dalliance with the Marcoses. During the Marcos years, she was a crusading force for human rights in Davao City—even though her husband, Vicente, formerly a governor of Davao province, was so close to Ferdinand Marcos that he created a Cabinet position for Vicente when he became president: Secretary for General Services, which has since been abolished. Soledad made no bones about her stance against the dictatorship. During the series of “*Welgang Bayan*” (National Strike) in 1983, after the opposition leader Benigno Aquino Jr. was assassinated at the airport tarmac in Manila in August that year, kickstarting a series of events that led to the assumption of Aquino’s wife Corazon into the presidency three years later, Soledad was among those who led the protest march from the Rizal Park in Davao City, where the city hall is, all the way to the Jesuit-run Ateneo de Davao, where Duterte once studied.

This courageous show of dissent was part of the *Kalasitas* (Making Noise) Mindanao Festival organised by artists and cultural workers under the umbrella of the *Welgang Bayan*. During this march, Soledad walked alongside some of the illustrious dramatis personae of protest art in the Philippines (some of whom have since been named National Artists): the social realist film director Lino Brocka, who began his career at the Philippine Educational Theatre Association and went on to wow cineastes at the Cannes Film Festival; the poet and critic Bien Lumbera; and Nestor Horfilla, a titan of Philippine theatre who works in the grassroots communities throughout the archipelago. Horfilla and his Kaliwat Theatre Collective, it must be noted, famously did a production of *Macbeth* in 1997. He titled it *Balay ni Khadil* (The House of Khadil), using the play as a metaphor for the ten years of the establishment of an autonomous Muslim region in Mindanao headed by the Muslim rebel leaders who entered into an agreement with Marcos.

Largely due to Soledad's prominent role in the anti-Marcos movement in Mindanao, President Corazon Aquino appointed Soledad's son Rodrigo as officer-in-charge of the office of the vice mayor in Davao City in 1986, launching Rodrigo Duterte into his political career. Now that he is president of the republic, Duterte confounds a number of those who know this story with his public display of affection for the Marcoses. This coziness, among other things, has fueled the apprehension that he might do a Marcos: martial law in Mindanao may be but a prelude to the return of martial law nationwide. In February 19, 2019, only six days before this year's anniversary of the EDSA People Power Revolution that toppled the Marcos regime, the Supreme Court of the Republic of the Philippines upheld the legality of the third extension of martial law in Mindanao.

"Still, the parallelisms between the oppression and struggle for freedom in 1980s Romania (their revolution came three years after EDSA) and the newly emerging threats to liberty in today's Philippines were all too apparent," the *Inquirer's* Cora Llamas declared in her [review](#) of Guelan Luarca's translation of Caryl Churchill's *Mad Forest*. "It is heartening to see that this production was mounted by thinking, committed young people, whose recognition of the signs of the times might just help prevent sordid history from repeating itself."

At a time when critiques against the current dispensation have become fraught with allegations of frightful consequences—media and watchdog institutions claim harassment because of their independent stance—some Filipino journalists are creating an alternative arena of public discourse: the arts. In the lifestyle pages (among Philippine newspapers, only the *Inquirer* has a separate theatre section, a brainchild of the indomitable lifestyle editor Thelma Sioson San Juan), it seems that art journalists write about the arts to engage readers into the maelstrom of today's issues and debates. The arts become a springboard to draw attention to larger national concerns.

These articles about and reviews of theatre performances and art events are often overlooked by keen partisan eyes scanning the news and opinion pages. In these "safe spaces," the editors manage to highlight certain public issues with such innocuous headlines as "[DLSU theatre group presents plays on human rights in Taft, Laguna campuses](#)." (DLSU refers to the De La Salle University, an elite school run by a Catholic congregation.) Even the otherwise non-political arts writer Pablo Tariman began a [paragraph](#) by saying, "In this age of political uncertainty...."

Reporting on an awards night in the theatre circuit, Amadis Ma. Guerrero [pointed out](#), "In accepting the award for *Ang Pag-uusig* (The Crucible), director [Dennis] Marasigan said, 'The events portrayed are not just those that happened in Massachusetts (witch-hunting) but also what is happening today in our time. It is the duty of the artist not just to entertain, but to be a witness to what is happening today.'"

Artists and writers in the Philippines have had a long history of bearing witness to the times. The revolution against Spain, the colonial master for 300 years, was instigated mainly by the publication and illicit circulation of Dr. Jose Rizal's two novels, *Noli Me Tangere* (Touch Me Not) and *El Filibusterismo* (The Subversive, but popularly translated as The Reign of Greed), which depicted how the friars and the Spanish colonial government oppressed the Filipinos.

When the Filipinos won that revolution in 1898, Spain surreptitiously sold the Philippines to the United States for \$20 million; that's roughly \$2 per Filipino at the time. In November 4, 1901, the American colonial government issued Act No. 292, or the Sedition Act, which made any mention or reference to Philippine independence a crime. Section 10 of the Sedition Act deemed it unlawful to articulate, verbally or in writing or through print or other similar means, the independence of the Philippine Islands

or their separation from the United States. Filipinos advocating independence turned to other means of articulation and discovered theatre.

They put up plays and musicals where the characters became symbolic of the motherland, the freedom fighters, and the new colonisers. When the American censors were not looking, the cast arranged themselves and their costumes and props onstage to form the revolutionary (now, the Philippine) flag, and for a few minutes the audiences were roused into nationalistic fervor. In May 10, 1903, Judge Paul W. Linebarger of the Court of First Instance of Batangas banned Juan Abad's *Tanikalang Guinto* (Golden Chain) performance because he found it "seditious." He sentenced Abad to two years' imprisonment, aside from a fine of \$2,000. While out on bail, the playwright wrote another play, *Isang Punlo ng Kaaway* (An Enemy Bullet). This was performed at Teatro Rizal in the outskirts of Manila in May 8, 1904. This led to Abad's second arrest.

In its July 6, 1903 issue, *The Manila Times* reported that a theatre manager, ten actors, and the playwright Juan Matapang Cruz were arrested because of their involvement in the play *Hindi Aco Patay* (I Am Not Dead). What happened was that when the revolutionary flag was unfurled at the finale, an American soldier watching the show threw a beer bottle at it. He then hopped onstage with his friends, and they destroyed the scenery.

In February 21, 1905, during a performance of Gabriel Beato Francisco's *Ang Katipunan* (The Revolution), the police in Laoag, Ilocos Norte, now a Marcos stronghold, took the entire audience into custody.

Arthur S. Riggs, a writer in the American military, reflected on these developments in 1905: "It is difficult for Americans to conceive of dramas to see [for] which they would risk arrest, jeopardize their personal safety from bodily harm, and which, when seen, would stir them to such a pitch of indignation and enthusiasm that they could leave the theatre full of purpose against the government and its emissaries."

The esteemed Filipino cultural critic Doreen G. Fernandez, who documented this history of protest theatre in the Philippines in her various writings, particularly in her paper, *Seditious and Subversive: Theatre of War* (Manila, National Commission for Culture and the Arts, November 17, 2003), said that protest theatre flourished even during the Japanese Occupation. She said in our theatre class in college that the Japanese allowed movies and plays in wartime Manila as long as these were not American or American-inspired. Filipinos lost no time in reinventing the American-era vaudeville as a "stage show" with the exact same variety show-type mix of musical numbers, skits, magic acts, dances, acrobatics, and more.

Quickly gaining quite a following was the comic duo Tugo and Pugo. "They would make fun of the Japanese non-verbally, by pulling up their cuffs and revealing rows of wristwatches, which the Japanese had taken to confiscating and wearing simultaneously," Fernandez recalled in her paper. "Especially remembered is the skit in which a sorrowing daughter is consoled by her father with the assurance that 'Mang (Elder) Arturo will return,' an obvious reference to General Douglas MacArthur and his promise to the Filipino people, 'I shall return'."

What has returned in the Philippine arts scene these days is a renewed sense of protest and purpose. Even Tanghalang Pilipino, the resident drama company of the Cultural Center of the Philippines, declares, "As the season has come together, some themes have emerged and as always, they speak right to the current zeitgeist. With fresh new voices and extraordinary new plays, you will find a deeper

feeling and understanding of 'love for the country (and of countrymen), freedom, culture, truth, justice, goodness, nature, the beloved, and kindness' in the most unlikely places." Its well-respected artistic director, Nanding Josef, has launched a lecture series that will run until 2020, kicking off with a session with the eminent Philippine culture scholar Nicanor Tiongson on "Theatre and Authoritarianism."

The Philippine Educational Theatre Association, or Peta, which recently won the Ramon Magsaysay Awards (the Asian equivalent of the Nobel Prize) for Literature and Communication, has named its ongoing season "Stage of the Nation." Lasting until June this year, the season is "a blend of the old and the new, as Peta strives to renew its mandate of performing and teaching, reaching out to vulnerable communities (like families affected by the brutal drug campaign), training the youth, political advocacy and, not least, staging entertaining hit musicals with a social message," Amadis Ma. Guerrero reported in the *Inquirer*. He quoted executive director Beng Santos-Cabangon as saying, "Theatre is a platform for social issues. Every day is an opportunity for us to reach people. So many things are happening that we should be talking about. It's crucial at this time to be out there, and to be counted."

The question is, does this resurgence of protest theatre indicate that things are back to the bad old days, or does this underscore the idea that People Power was but a pipe dream and there is an unfinished revolution still at hand?

Other observers of Philippine culture and politics interrogate today's surge of protest theatre. "Until protest theatre can offer better than simplistic comparisons between Marcos and Duterte, it will never pass audition for the role of a Cassandra," said Rufi Vigilante, a former Asia-Pacific news online editor for CCN.com. "The erroneous insistence, for example, that the declaration of martial law under Marcos and now Duterte are frightfully similar plays blind to a present and real threat acknowledged by the Philippines' own neighbors, particularly Malaysia and Indonesia: that foreign Islamist terrorism can penetrate not only Mindanao's porous and loosely guarded borders but the Southeast Asian region itself."

In his e-mail to me, Vigilante pointed out, "The revival of protest theatre in the time of President Rodrigo Duterte attends mainstream media's decline and social media's rise as the arbiter of which political narrative prevails."

He explained: "The anti-Marcos, pro-Liberal narrative has had a long life since the so-called Edsa Revolution, propagated by an oligarchy that still owns and controls mainstream media but whose overt disdain for a highly popular president has crippled the main engine of its propaganda. Protest theatre presents itself as a sponsorable enterprise to a desperate oligarchy. It contrives a climate of dissent amid Duterte's steady approval rating, as surveyed, across all social classes. The paltry attendance at the Edsa anniversary celebration this year shows that the old political narrative is in search of the audience it used to inspire and command."

"The complex, true-to-life character of a president with a foul mouth but a seemingly good heart will continue to enthrall the public imagination more than any stereotyped character onstage," Vigilante said. "On street or stage, anti-Marcos and anti-Duterte protests will ever be valid expressions of the freedom of speech, but the failure of their intent will owe to the continuing failure to address equally valid questions about the ineptitude and corruption specifically of two Aquino administrations that had boasted a moral high ground actually built on sand."

So far, the Duterte Administration has not clamped down on the arts scene, which is becoming a lively arena of critical voices and views—not just in theatre but also in film and the visual and literary arts. The administration has ensured, however, that the government’s cultural agencies, notably the Cultural Center and the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, are headed by its appointees. Already, there are moves to create a Department of Culture that would bring artists and cultural workers into the fold of the bureaucracy.

A telling clue of how the government understands the role culture plays in the dynamics of change and continuity in Philippine society surfaced late last year. In November 2018, the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) threatened to sue the producers of a popular television action-drama series because of its “grossly unfair and inaccurate portrayal of our police force.” Duterte’s current right hand in the drug war, Director General Oscar Albayalde, the new chief of the Philippine National Police, told a press briefing that the TV show *Ang Probinsyano* (The Hillbilly) “gives us a bad impression,” further calling the prime-time *teleserye* “unfair” and “very disturbing.” The cast of the TV series promptly appeared before the authorities to make their peace.

When Gibbs Cadiz, the *Inquirer’s* theatre editor, was giving a roundup of what he considered the best nonmusical productions of the year, he wrote that his choices “all had to do, one way or another, with questions of faith and belief vis-a-vis reason, free expression, creativity, independent thought, empirical knowledge. What are the chances of such a striking conjunction? (Or was it all a first attempt to make sense of our anxiety at being increasingly unable to believe in anything, in the age of normalized lying and ‘fake news’?)” Not long afterward, Cadiz was no longer just writing about the current moment through Manila’s theatre offerings—he was now the voice of the newspaper as the *Inquirer’s* new opinion editor.

A member of the editorial board praised Cadiz’s “sense of moral outrage.” A soft-spoken fitness buff who spent six years in a seminary and graduated with a degree in philosophy, Cadiz admitted to a fellow editor that he splurged his first salary at the *Inquirer* to buy tickets to Repertory Philippines. (It is the well-loved English-language theatre company in Makati, the premiere business district, from which many Filipinos in the original cast of *Miss Saigon* earned their stripes. This included Lea Salonga, who went on to clinch both an Olivier and a Tony for her performance in the internationally acclaimed musical.) Writing about the arts as the stage of the nation must have been among Cadiz’s most compelling credentials for his promotion. In an article remembering the late editor in chief Letty Jimenez-Magsanoc, Cadiz said she asked him to write about the elections for the front page. Apparently looking at the news as the stage of the nation, too, he opened his piece thus, “There’s a good reason elections are typically equated with the business of putting on a show....”

One show he probably would have written about in both his theatre and opinion sections, had he been in attendance, took place in New York City not too long ago. This was when the Filipino performing artist Ea Torrado delivered the news, so to speak, through a movement piece she presented at the Columbia Journalism School’s Joseph Pulitzer World Room, where the Pulitzer Prizes are announced every year. She began her performance, which she titled *Wailing Women*, by standing in front of the audience in a billowy blouse and black leggings, barefoot. She explained that she had been giving movement workshops to the wives and mothers of those killed in the drug war in the Philippines. She said that in these art therapy sessions, she always asked participants how they were feeling at the moment.

Assuming the characters of these women, Torrado crumpled into various poses of anguish, fear, agitation, contemplation, and anger, her hands raised in severe angular extensions that twisted her

body this way and that. She tried to say something, but nothing came out except a gurgling sound that seemed to choke her. She began to meander through an unseen labyrinthine maze carrying this sound, slowly picking up her pace. She broke out running around in circles, panting heavily, still choking on that inaudible cry. And then she stopped. She looked at the audience with defiance and despair, and slowly turned around, heaving her shoulders as if in exasperation or surrender or rage. Now carried by the hypnotic music of *Third Eye Chakra* by Meditation Balance suddenly played on the sound system, she went down on her knees, drowning ever so gently in her dance of lamentation.

I was there during the afternoon rehearsal, when the iconic Filipino journalist Sheila Coronel, co-founder of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism and currently the academic dean of Columbia's J-School, was moved to tears. She told Torrado, "What did you do? It seems more powerful this time around."

Filipino photojournalist Raffy Lerma, whose "Pieta" photograph of a woman cradling her partner's bloodied body freshly killed in the drug war in Manila's streets one night has gone viral globally, pulled Torrado aside after the rehearsal and showed her a Facebook post. It was about the event that evening, the book launch of *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency* (Quezon City, Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017), which would kick off with her performance. Lerma pointed to one of the comments. Torrado cringed, reacting to what she saw on the screen: "I'm now an enemy of the state?"

Over coffee, Torrado told me that she was aware of the risks she was taking. "To be critical of the political situation in the Philippines can be a death sentence," she said. "But I am not making a political statement. I am just articulating the sense of loss of these women."

I remembered Torrado and her *Wailing Women* when, toward the end of *Macbeth* by candlelight at Shakespeare's Globe in London recently, as opposition to Macbeth's regime of murders and lies was mounting, the king asks in the darkness, "What is that noise?" A voice in the shadows replies, "It is the cry of women, my good lord." In bewailing this orgy of grieving, a character in the play may have had a premonition of Torrado's dance of lamentation, divining the future in the instant when he sobs, "Each new morn/ New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows...." ■