

A. A. C. Umali III

**LEARNING FROM THE MASTERS:
TEACHING IFUGAO *HUDHUD* CHANTS,
SAN DIONISIO *KOMEDYA* AND THE BONTOC
EAGLE DANCE IN THE CLASSROOM**

Lubos po kaming nagpapasalamat sa Kunstkamera sa pag-imbata sa amin para makapiling ninyo sa napakahalagang araw na ito ng Pilipinas Muna. Lalung-lalo na kay Dr. Maria Stanyukovich at sa lahat ng paghihirap na dinaanan niya para sa paghahanda kaugnay ng pagdalo namin ngayon. Nagpapasalamat din po kami Kay Philippine Ambassador Victor G. Garcia III, kay Consul Roderico Atienza sa lahat ng kanilang tulong. Labis po akong natutuwa na makapiling kayong lahat na nagtuturo at nag-aaral ng aming kultura.

This paper will discuss how the living performance traditions of the Ifugao *hudhud* chants, San Dionisio *komedyas* and the Bontoc eagle dance are taught and transferred to the younger generation in a fun and enjoyable manner in the confines of the classroom at the University of the Philippines Diliman.

My interest in experiential learning or “learning a performance tradition (the actual movements and the chanting) directly from the master” can be traced years back when I went to Kyoto, Japan, as a graduate student, to study how Japanese theatrical traditions are preserved and transmitted from generation to generation. I was hoping that I could contribute to creating awareness and generating interest in Filipino and other Asian performance traditions and the preservation and revitalization of Filipino performance traditions here in the Philippines.

In Kyoto, I was introduced to the concept of “*keiko*” or training-rehearsal. The core of the training during “*keiko*” is the direct one-on-one encounter between master and student. The mode of teaching is oral and follows traditional methods of teaching and learning by rote repetition with little or no discussion of the philosophy or history or

spiritual basis of the performance traditions. The master demonstrates and the student observes (観察をする) and imitates (真似をする) what the master executes. They repeat (繰り返す) the pattern over and over again until the body (of the student) remembers (体で覚える) how to execute the movement and how dialogue is chanted or delivered and until the student gains, to a certain degree, a mastery of the form.

While attending separate training-rehearsals conducted by masters of Kyogen, Kabuki and Noh Theatre, I couldn't help but wonder why in my 3 years as a theatre student at the Philippine High School for the Arts and my 4 years as a theatre student in UP¹, I never had the experience of learning how to perform any of the Philippine performance traditions. In my theatre classes, we were never taught how to recite a passage from any of our epics nor of the pasyon, nor did we learn how to execute the *batalla* of the *komedya* nor sing an excerpt from a *sarswela*.

Back then and perhaps if I may be allowed to say so, until now, when we study Philippine Theatre forms, we only study its history, we look at pictures of “the glory that was *Komedya*” and “the grandeur that was the *Sarswela*”, we watch a re-staging of the form on video and, once in awhile, if we are lucky, we could watch an actual re-staging at the CCP² or in UP. Most of the time, we read about the description of the forms like they are some archeological materials and museum pieces and we “imagine” how the forms were performed in the past. We talk about how the forms are preserved in certain places in the Philippines but preservation is never our concern. We never go out of our way to immerse ourselves in places where performance traditions have survived to learn the form, perhaps afraid to leave the confines of our comfort zone in the university or taint its “legitimate” practice of theatre, which traces its roots to Greek theatre.

The closest I can recall of an encounter with Asian performance tradition in high school was staging a Kyogen, a Japanese comic play. George Hernandez, my theatre mentor in high school, directed the Kyogen play, “*Busu*” using the English text translated as “Poison”.

¹ UP — University of the Philippines.

² CCP — Cultural Centre of the Philippines.

The use of a Kyogen text and the absence of a set in its staging is the closest it can get to a Kyogen performance. Its staging was nearly realistic, a far cry from the stylized movements and delivery of lines in a Kyogen performance which one can achieve only after constant training and practice.

My exposure to Japanese performance tradition made me understand that both the written text and the director come secondary to the actor. What is most important is the actor — training his body and voice. Because in performance traditions, the actors embody the form. The actor has very little freedom to interpret the text, in any way he wants to, because the performance of the text has been codified by the actor, the way it was taught to him by his father and the way his father learned it from his grandfather— through what we call “*salinlahi*” or transfer from one generation to another.

During training-rehearsal in Kyoto, oftentimes I would ask myself, how will devoting hours, days and weeks learning Japanese forms help me fulfill my dream of creating awareness and interest in Filipino and other Asian performance traditions and their preservation and revitalization?

The first opportunity came after I returned to the Philippines and joined UP. Tony Mabesa wanted to stage a Kabuki and he asked me to co-direct *Kanjincho*, a Kabuki performed by Filipinos in UP and CCP in 2003. It was my earnest hope that by looking at a Japanese performance tradition, we would know more about ourselves as Asian and as Filipino. We devoted 6 months training with three Kabuki masters. All those time, there was this nagging question inside me — shouldn't we be devoting those long hours training Filipino actors and theatre enthusiasts to master Filipino forms also and not only the Japanese form?

The second opportunity came in January 2006 by way of **Hudhud and Noh, A Dialogue of Cultures, Colloquia and Performances**. Dr. Maria Stanyukovich was kind enough to join us in this event by presenting a paper. The fateful inclusion of Hudhud of the Philippines and the Noh of Japan in the very first proclamation in 2001 of UNESCO's Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity provided an inspiration for a dialogue, symbolic of the

celebration of the golden years of diplomatic relations between Japan and the Philippines.

In this dialogue, the Hudhud and Noh culture-bearers were made to take center stage to talk about their tradition and to perform it. Scholars who study the form and artists who adapted the form were made to present their works after the masters talked and performed. Students were assigned to help organize the important event. Responding to the challenge, they took the initiative of reading about the two forms and conducting their own research and group discussion, making them more knowledgeable about the Noh and Hudhud far better than if they just sat in the classroom listening to my boring lecture or watching a powerpoint presentation. By the time they witnessed an excerpt of a performance they were already more than receptive to the idea. One student, Catherine B. Contreras 2002–09224 who participated in the event commented: “Holding such an event was not only interesting but socially-relevant. It did not only create awareness and knowledge about other cultures but, more importantly, it gave us an opportunity to further appreciate our own traditions”.

Another student participant Vivitz Grace G. Vina said: “It was a good thing that the flow of thought was organized in such a way that sufficient information was provided for the listeners who were new to the concept of these traditional performing arts of both countries. The performances were a good way to start the event especially because they were performed by people who really practice the art and are so-called masters in their own right. It was an excellent bird’s eye view of the whole event”.

The third opportunity came when we organized the **UPCIS³ School of Living Traditions: The Ifugao Hudhud Chants and the Japanese Noh Theatre**. Here both the culture bearers of the *Hudhud* and the Noh imparted their skills to UP students following traditional instruction of observation, imitation and repetition. The two main facilitators, who are both culture-bearers and academicians, combined the physical experience with some theoretical or philosophical and spiritual discussion of the form, which further enhanced learning. Jenny Rose S.Unawa (2005) a student who took part in the event

³ UP Center of International Studies.

explained: “Learning the *hudhud* chant was a hard task at first. It was like singing a song with a very unfamiliar tune but with the smiling faces of our mentors and their full-hearted willingness to teach the class, quitting became a harder task. We attended every time permitting sessions, listened to the chants, learned the words’ meanings and understand the underlying story. Some terms became familiar and we even became curious of their dialect. Common greetings can be found in the chant. We find it very surprising to know that there are hundreds or even thousands of versions of the chant...The chants became more and more familiar as we attend the sessions. The words are no longer difficult to pronounce and we even memorized some of its lines. Sometimes, we even unknowingly chant to ourselves. We first thought that we just need to chant with the teachers and pronounce whatever they are pronouncing. But we later know that we were wrong. The once hard task became an unforgettable song that we will always sing”.

Another student who engaged in the activity Mark Joseph M. Banaria wrote: “At first I find it a little strange to be attempting to perform a chant, which I never even had interest in, and more so, one, which sounded a little too different from mainstream music. The content seemed to be ordinary tribal with the “god creating man, man meets woman, and woman finds another man kind of story,” and the tune, well, I could only hope there was any. I was already getting bored just by the thought of it until I actually listened to the real thing and found myself yearning mightily to do it like they did. Truth be told, I was greatly enchanted. They sung so effortlessly and leisurely, yet it sounded so profound and coordinated. It was totally different from how we improvisingly sang it like a choir, restraining ourselves from stretching our throats, and staring too hard on the lyrics, as if it were a music score. I was inspired to discover the secret behind enjoying the chant and ultimately understanding its worth. As we practiced further, I took mental notes of how our Ifugao guests did it marvelously, and I was surprised to realize they never read any lyric and they were closing their eyes. They never actually cared to make a perfect tune, and yet they sounded pleasant singing together. Not long after, I was chanting, free of any restraints and awkwardness. I immersed myself in the chant and tried to visualize the content. I began to feel as if I was narrating the story to myself, singing in such a carefree manner

that made me feel entertained. Although I didn't get to do it as well as they did, I achieved such an understanding of the music that I was surprisingly enjoying it, which I just found out was the whole point in doing it".

The fourth opportunity came with **Komedya Oh Noh! Workshop at Huntahan ng mga Batikang Aktor Kadoble ang The Italian Restaurant**. Here the culture bearers of the Komedya conducted the workshop among UP students following traditional instruction of observation, imitation and repetition. A participant to the workshop, Kenna Barit (2007), a BSBE student affirmed: "The... most exciting part was the national theatres of Southeast Asia and *Komedya*... With the help of the different learning aids like reporting, lecture/keynote speech of Dr. Nicanor Tiongson and the *Komedya* Fiesta 2008: First national *Komedya* Festival, we understood and experienced real life *komedyas*, not just in books and reading materials. My favorite part was the Friday *Komedya* shows, wherein I was able to watch three (3) of them. *Komedya ng Iligan*, *Komedya ng San Dionisio* and *Komedya ng Don Galo*, which both performed Prinsipe Rodante. Surprisingly we had *Komedya* workshops and there we learned the basic marches and fight scenes of the komedyantes. I'm one of the 6 chosen people to perform at Aldaba Hall this Wednesday and I'm so excited about it. I also loved seeing Prinsipe Aladin himself, teaching us the "moves" in the workshop".

Leslie Ann Aguirre, another participant who is a BS Architecture student wrote: "Honestly, I was reluctant to watch the *komedyas* performances but watching it was worth every bit of my time. To watch the *komedyas* is something special, but to increase the excitement even more is to learn the *komedyas* moves (*marcha*, *dicho* etc) through the workshops during our class hours. At some point, I realized the great effort of actors and actresses with every performance. And those swords aren't as light as they look. I got to try to experience handling it, firsthand, when I volunteered for the class performance of the *Komedya* during the "*huntahan*". It was fun, although nerve-wracking to be watched by all the other students".

Kimberly Alcaroza observed: "Having been practically force-fed buckets of komedyas this semester, I can genuinely say that I've gained

a new appreciation for a performance art I never even knew existed at the start of the semester”.

Krystal de Vera (2006) wrote: “For me, this part was really exhausting but at the same time fun and enjoyable. I mean we were made to go to many talks and other events and with all honesty, it ate up most of my time. However, after going to a particular event, I leave with either a smile on my face or with new knowledge. In general, I guess I liked this... because it was more interactive than just listening to lectures. I believe that students learn more and better when they acquire first-hand experience of things than just by listening to them”.

I would like to add than just by reading and imagining about them.

The fifth encounter came with **The UPCIS Workshop, Colloquia and Performances on Living Traditions: The Celestial Maiden of Southeast Asia and Japan**, which we organized in March 2009. The celestial maiden is a heavenly being who comes down to earth to take a bath, falls in love with a mortal who hides her wings preventing her from going back to heaven. To represent the Philippines in this event are the Kankanai's of Bontoc, Mountain Province who taught our students the eagle dance. A student from Baguio, Jaimar Palispis commented: “...the Cordillera group... was for me the most interesting. It portrayed an Igorot cultural representation of the celestial maiden different from the others because the Igorot culture had 10 maidens in a single story. Coming from Baguio, I can deeply relate with the dancing style that was... rooted in the traditional dances of the Cordilleras, such as the Cañao, on which the feet pattern resembles alternating back and forth movement, compensated by smooth transitions of their hands creating a sensation of femininity...”

This face to face and direct encounter with culture-bearers and masters of the tradition give the students a peek into a window of cultural traditions, which are ancient because of its long history but at the same time contemporary, having been kept alive and preserved as a living form by practitioners of the form who ensured its transmission to the next generation.

Our students who took these short experiential courses with the masters will never become masters of the performance traditions, well, they could, if they so want to but that would entail a lot of time,

dedication and commitment, which I hope will awaken one or two or three of our students. But for me, what is most important, is that at a certain time in their young lives they were able to experience being part of a performance tradition which taught them respect for cultural differences, made them deepen their appreciation of their own culture to the point of being proud of it and understanding the need to hand it down to the next generations. Let me end this paper by quoting from a group paper read by Jarrie Roman: “However short the workshop was, it is still essential because it raised our awareness on our oral and intangible tradition. It made us recognize the importance of our cultural heritage in maintaining our cultural identity. On top of all these we have felt the need to safeguard and revitalize it so we can hand it down to future generations. It is a link to our past and it must also be a link to our future. It is so precious that we should not let it fade away”.