

THEATRE IN THE REGIONS:  
A SOUTHERN PHILIPPINE PERSPECTIVE

*Steven Patrick C. Fernandez*

The multifarious and diverse theater activities around the country are too extensive and too variegated to discuss. Let me, however, assess certain experiences I am well aware of and conclude that theater development in the regions, despite the many difficulties, is dynamic.

I shall focus this paper on the theater movement in Mindanao — as model for regional theater — because of several good reasons: 1.) Mindanao has a strong theater movement with diverse groups and networks; 2.) the conditions that have shaped this dynamic cultural atmosphere may be a microcosm of the bigger Philippine socio-cultural and historical developments; 3.) it has the rich cultural resources of its diverse peoples that blend and are transplanted in the theater; and, 4.) Mindanao's theater movement may reflect the directions Philippine theater may take.

I shall therefore discuss contemporary theater and its development in Mindanao, assess the conditions that have shaped this theater movement, collate and make general assumptions about this movement's positive contributions, and evaluate the prospects of theater in the island.

Considering Mindanao's diverse performing arts activities, I shall limit this paper's understanding of *theater* to stage performance rather than to the integrated traditional performing arts that have other social functions (e.g. *sinulog*, *binanog*, etc.).

*Mindanao: A Background*

Mindanao, our country's second largest island and the southernmost geographic unit, is interesting in many ways: culturally, it has diverse communities that, due to historical developments, have interacted (oftentimes with hostility) among themselves and evolved the present Mindanao cultural mainstream: the diverse sectors of animistic ethnic communities, the Islamized, the Hispanic, and Afro-American West-oriented urban lowlanders. Historically, the island had undergone a long period of struggle against colonial rule and the domination of both foreign and local colonizers. The Malay-based ethnic cultures — having had various economic and cultural ties with the Chinese, Malays, Arabs, and other Asian peoples before the coming of the Spaniards — were Islamized, then Hispanized, then Americanized in a varied overlaying of cultural tiers. In recent years, people from the north have migrated in big waves to Mindanao a land that has promised economic opportunities and at the same time generated serious hostilities. Economic changes fueled primarily by migration and industrialization have subsequently accelerated the urbanization (thus, Westernization) of the region.

The above conditions have molded to an influential degree the shape of today's Mindanao theater. Partly, cultural groups and alliances have been organized with the vision to use theater to improve political and economic conditions brought about by the ramifications of history.

Corollary to these, the economic changes produced new ethos and needs that encouraged artistic and cultural growth and the development of a Mindanao "identity" in the performing arts. An emerging class of academicians, professionals, and businessmen articulated best the problems of economics, cultural "identity," and cultural dynamics. These educational, political, and artistic leaders now spearhead the cultural movement.

The diverse cultural materials of Mindanao have been a rich source of both subject matter and media — for theater.

### Theater Today

Categorizing the whole spectrum of theater activities may not be a smart thing to do. Subject matter, forms, and intentions do overlap, and this encompassing nature should disallow division. Nevertheless, for purposes of illustration in my paper, let me categorize using my own perspectives and terms:

#### A. Division According to Intent

1.) Foreign-oriented Theater. Generally English-language based, this type of theater is usually presented by schools and by a few private groups and uses classical materials, modern European and American drama, or English translations of Asian plays for: the study of English grammar and diction, a school's extra-curricular activity, and entertainment. (Examples: Iligan's Player's Company, Davao's Center for the Performing Arts, University Drama Guilds organized by their English Departments.)

2.) Nationalist Theater. Using a variety of means, this type intends to use theater to stir up the "Pro-Filipino" cause for economic, political, and cultural "liberation." (Examples: community theater alliances, Iligan's LEAD, Butuan's EDCADS, Davao's Kulturang Atin.)

3.) Liberal Theater. Theater of mixed intents that uses a variety of materials both original Filipino (basically using the Filipino language or the vernacular) and foreign plays adapted in Filipino or the vernacular that may or may not have strictly the obvious overtones of a nationalist theater. (Examples: Iligan's IPAG, Marawi's Sining Kambayoka, Cagayan de Oro's CYDA/TELUN, and Malaybalay's Mandudulang Bukidnon.)

4.) Religious Theater. Theater performed in relation to religious celebrations like fiesta and Lent, usually performed annually, and for certain religious functions like the *panaad*. (Examples: Iligan's *Comedia de San Miguel* and *senakulo*.)

#### B. Division According to Form

1.) Integrated Traditional. Traditional theater integrating dance, music, the visual arts, and drama for ritual functions and with a religious quality. (Examples: Iligan's *sinulog*, *Comedia de San Miguel*, and the Higaonon *kaamulan* dances.)

2.) Contemporary: a) integrated tradition-based theater adapts traditional forms and transplants these into a contemporary medium usually integrating dance,

music, drama, folk literature, and the visual arts (Examples: "ethnic musicals" of IPAG, Kulturang Atin, Sining Kambayoka, or General Santos's Sining Kapapagariya) and integrating these with, b.) Western-adapted Theater using forms developed in the West and adapted into Filipino plays: social/psychological realism, expressionism, classical, etc.).

### Collations and Assumptions

The cultural, political, economic, and historical developments of Mindanao have shaped its theater movement into what it is today – dynamic, directed, and varied with mixed means and intents vitalized by a wealth of cultural sources.

To Philippine Theater, Mindanao has shared these positive contributions:

1.) The use and adaptation of the diverse traditional forms have evolved a characteristically Mindanao quality that has: (a.) helped in popularizing, thus "preserving" traditional forms and in developing an audience to understand, appreciate, and respect these forms; (b.) a native identity that most appropriately depicts inherent ethics, values, and the psychology of a community; (c.) allowed for a more expansive epic treatment of subject matter encompassing wider social and political perspectives, and allowed for easy integration with other media i.e., music, drama, dance, visual arts in ethnic, Asian, or Western structures; (d.) assisted groups to cope with our theater's "third world" conditions of scarce finances, resources, and crude technology because of these forms' spontaneity and improvisation that is more flexible, adaptable, and creative in the use of space, time, treatment, and technology; (e.) challenged artists to the discipline of formal study and technique to evolve higher standards of performance and to perhaps evolve a formal vocabulary; and, most importantly; (f.) created understanding and sympathy among our diverse cultures by the learning of one group about the ways of another;

2.) Its "Pro-Filipino" nationalist perspectives have enabled many to understand present realities and have opened a venue for the sentiments for social changes; and,

3.) Mindanao theater's generally homogenous directions, programs, and concerns have been made more viable by alliances and networking.

At present, Mindanao theater has slowly but surely widened its audience, acquired better theater management, improvised to make-do with its meager resources, and developed its own forms and techniques.

The following factors however still beset Mindanao theater: 1.) the perception about the lack of recognition and support for its efforts owing to the still-limited access of the government's decentralization program; 2.) limited resources for research (that restricts our access to the study of traditional materials therefore contributing to the misinterpretations of traditional forms and their ethnics), training, and performance (including support resources like infrastructure that hinder the attainment of high-quality performances; 3.) limited communication and interaction among the various artists, institutions, and networks in the country; 4.) limited knowledge in theater management and audience development; and, 5.) a lack of professionalism.

### *Prospects*

Mindanao theater by reputation remains a strong and dynamic sector in our country's cultural scene. It has sustained its strength because the same conditions that have developed Mindanao's cultural environment are still prevailing today. Other factors that contribute to this optimism include the initial success of the government's decentralization policy, the highly-motivated stage of "experimentation" where research, workshop, and showcase seem to be the basic concern of cultural workers to evolve newer means, and the positive attitude of these artists to organize to make collective their diverse efforts.

By these indications, Mindanao seems to have bright prospects for its theater. But then, an optimistic future will have to be supported by these conditions: a stronger network within and without the region facilitated by effective communications to open venues for regular interactions among groups nationwide; the opportunities to interact more often in festivals, conferences, and other collective activities to, among others, expose regional groups to other theaters of this country and the world; accessibility to training centers and libraries where information and reference may widen our artists' perceptions; wider linkages in the government's decentralization program where more grants and subsidies involving more substantial amounts be made available; and, eventually, a practical scheme that may finance infrastructure and its requirements in the regions.

Let us look forward to the time when one can truthfully say that there indeed is a movement towards a Filipino Theater.