

Beyond Realism: Theatre Pedagogy in Philippine Universities

STEVEN PATRICK C. FERNANDEZ

Abstract

Universities lead in Philippine theatre practice now. As the majority of viewers are the students filling up large sections of venues, arriving in droves, and making producers realize this audience's potentials, the academe shapes the appreciation of theatre. Theatre will therefore thrive, survive, and be popularized in the universities. Our schools will have the resources and motivations to nurture theatre-goers. The universities ignite an interest easily because study inherently breeds curiosity, inquisitiveness, the power to express, and the exploration to discover how meanings may be shown in many alternative ways. In the university, methods are studied and pedagogies are developed. The universities become the breeding grounds of new works that will eventually swell the ranks of our audiences. Because of these factors, innovation in theatre will evolve an audience that will spill into the mainstream of live performance. This condition should subsequently challenge the movies and TV as alternative (and intelligent) means of entertainment.

Key words: pedagogy, entertainment, innovation, new theatre production

STEVEN PRINCE C. FERNANDEZ attended the University of the Philippines elementary and high schools. He graduated with an AB degree in English at the Mindanao State University, Marawi City and an M.A. in Philippine Studies at University of the Philippines, Diliman and a Doctor in Fine Arts from De La Salle University. He is Full professor at the MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology and currently Artistic Director of the Integrated Performing Arts Guild (IPAG).

My premise is simple: *Philippine Theatre will be propagated in the universities.*

A cursory observation will tell us that most theatre being produced today are products of the universities. So have been theatre produced in the last 30 years – or the last generation. Most likely, theatre produced in the communities will have a leader who has had theatre training in school which training is put to good use in the communities. And with reason.

The universities are dynamic institutions serving the communities. In educating, schools do not only broaden their constituent's outlook or arm them for employment, but they truss the structures that allow students to experiment, innovate, decide on, and propagate new designs. The structures are built from the cultures of the communities – the Source – that nurtures theatre.

As our universities fuel the needs of industries, businesses, and government, so they, too, will combust the interest of our communities to seek for live performances.

Theatre in the Universities

Today as universities lead in Philippine theatre practice, Mindanao owns theatre practice that is school-initiated or is school-extended. Theatre makers are trained in schools but pronounce their relevance in the communities. The sustained practices, however, reside in the universities where a season can be produced, where a variety of forms and subjects are treated, where discourse is normal, where limitations are little obstacles, and where – most importantly – the audiences are based.

The communities have deluged their entertainment needs in the flood of TV fare, cinema, and DVD-CD movies. In mainstream theatre, the majority of viewers are the students filling up large sections of venues, arriving in droves, and making producers aware of this audience's potentials.

The academe shapes the appreciation of theatre. In the schools, the theories of performance are understood and the craft of the stage is practiced.

Theatre thrives in the academe for these reasons: 1.) theatre is an inherent academic undertaking, its study as usual as the study of literature or reading; 2.) an audience can be mobilized whether they be

willing or unwilling to watch; 3.) the higher "intellectual" standards in universities (relative to what any community would normally have) allow an appreciative response to plays and other forms of live performances; 4.) less restrictions of commerce and censorship encourage innovation and dissent to usually-produced styles of plays.

While it is in the universities where theatre survives and is popularized, ironically in the past, these same universities through their use of a foreign language, strange themes, and misunderstood manners dealt theatre its depreciation by excluding the mass of theatre-goers to participate in academe-initiated theatre. More important than creating theatre in its crucible is theatre's propagation to a wider audience — its end users, and its ultimate viewers — the community. From the university will theatre emanate and be propagated, but in the communities will theatre be institutionalized.

The universities set the beginnings. In our impoverished conditions — physical, economic, political, and intellectual — our schools will have the more resources and motivations to bear generations of theatre-makers and theatre-goers whose appetites are whetted by exciting ways meanings in life are expressed and explained.

Innovations fired by Universities

The university as a crucible of diametric ideas blend the oppositions to mix a new order. New ideas are tested, while old ones are put to the test of their relevance.

Innovation and reinvention are important. An audience needs new ways to look at new meanings expressed in new manners.

The universities ignite an interest in the theatre easily because study inherently breeds curiosity, inquisitiveness, the power to express, and the exploration to discover how meanings may be shown in many ways. It is also in the university where methods are studied, logic applied, and pedagogy developed.

If universities produce the teachers that feed our students' minds, so will universities produce the practitioners that will popularize theatre.

Innovation in theatre production should evolve a corresponding audience, an audience that spills into the mainstreams of theatre production and into the communities. An audience is what feeds theatre and the economics of production: they are the ticket buyers, the patrons whose growth also influences the participation of business and the leaders of the community in cultural events.

Our audiences have developed in size, needs, and in their appreciation. In a sense, they have become more "sophisticated." To sustain growth and the interest of our audiences, the universities should meet their demands.

Outdated forms and processes change especially with the theatre's challenge to meet headlong the movies and TV as alternative (and intelligent) means of entertainment. These changes come in the form of new procedures of production and our reinventions of styles of presentation beyond the usual. Hence, "Realism" in the title which I use both literary and figuratively.

"Realism" suggests works in the conventional mode, a *representational* manner of production where in verisimilar qualities of life are imitated on stage. Time and space are represented like that in the real world, with three-dimensional characters speaking like real people and spaces copied to the last realistic detail. The audience of this theatre is passive, a "peeping tom" given the opportunity in a darkened hall to peep through walls and windows to actions going on inside another space. It is a dated style, one which the movies have taken over and can very well do.

Realism grew out of a history and culture influenced by Money Capitalism in the 19th century West, an objective prescriptive expression of knowledge that Science abetted. It had very little to project in Filipino realities and tradition.

While I do not suggest the eradication of this style – its study is as seminal as the study of the classics is imperative to the theatre maker as many masterpieces were written in the *realistic-naturalistic* modes – this kind of theatre crosses paths with the realism in the movies and of TV. The difference in their realisms, however, is on the live and imaginal manners subjects are presented. Theatre has live persons re-enacting a slice of life; movies and TV have images recreated by film and/or digital technology.

'Parang Sine'

The common compliment "*parang sine*" for an appreciated play is unfortunate, a disservice realism has heaped on our theatre.

The verisimilitude of the movies surpasses that of the theatre for obvious reasons. Film settings and sets are real to the last detail. The movies are a *representational* medium and our audiences have accepted this fact. Besides having the greater access to technology, movies

will have the more resources and the more chances of having these expenses recouped because of its larger market and accessibility. Theatre, being live, will have a one performance, one audience exposure presentation as against the movies' one performance, thousands of exposures advantage. Generally, too, images in the movies are prescriptive, at best suggestive, while that of the theatre are metaphorical.

There is little we can do to keep our audiences from choosing the movies over the theatre if these mediums choose the same manners. The movies depict realities in well-defined lines. Theirs is a realistic medium. Reality is copied in its exact image, the signifier (images, sound, and text) signify the signified; there is no replica. By magnifying these mediums on a large screen, the movies complete its power to engage through this subliminal means. To survive, the theatre needs to be different; our audiences will have to accept the fact that the film and theatre are two distinct mediums. That's why ours is called *The Theatre*.

Another difference lies in the way these mediums relate to their audiences. Film considers the audience a passive viewer (someone sitting in the dark), while theatre sees the audience as dynamic, interactive, participating actively in a forum-like process. Film prescribes its images denoting exactly what it is, while theatre belabours the audience's imagination to re-create. One detail is setting, another suggests inciting the audience's mind to piece the visual-aural signals to work out a corresponding emotion.

When we propagate the fact that the reality recreated in theatre is stressed in different often non-realistic ways, then we ensure theatre's popularity and survival.

As theatre makers, we will have to realize that the survival of the theatre depends on how current we meet these postmodern times.

Tradition as Base

Building on tradition is important. Tradition is not using a single form all the time. Tradition is always contemporary, changing forms as the need arises. "Realism" is not in our tradition in the theatre, literature, or art.

Generations of theatre practices lay layer upon layer to what Philippine Theatre is now. These layers include the forms that

performances are built from and the history these forms have evolved from. These layers borrow from indigenous and colonial sources from their roots in epics and rituals to their transmutation in adopted European drama styles.

History embraces a gamut of events, subjects, and themes that bear form, or the best manner a subject may be presented. The decision to select dramatic form is a time-based one, where meaning (the story and its theme) is expressed by a prevalent form (manner of performance), and where this dramatic form is shaped by the trends of artistic expression.

In the ages before the movies, communities produced theatre. Forms like the *moro-moro* were well-attended affairs that featured Christian victory over the infidels. The *senakulo* usually supported by the church or church-backed groups defined piety and surrender as worthy values. Subjects in these codified forms best suited the proselytizing designs of the Spanish.

"Legitimate" theatre, which the universities in the early years of the American occupation propagated, engendered a colonial design that remolded a communal mindset to become advantageous to America and the West.

Didactic theatre of improvisations and caricatures sprouted in the rebellious 60s and 70s in response to an era sparked by the aggressions in the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and America's expansionist policies.

Updating Dramatic Forms

These dramatic forms well suited the eras they represented. They functioned within their time and space. But beyond the histories of modern events and consequences, our Post Modern era will require a new set of expressions that should well appropriate – and respond to – the realities of globalization, the challenges to the central powers (as exemplified by the revolutions in Islam vs. the West, and the decolonization of newly-formed nations), the redefinition of meanings in signals and symbols, the fine focusing to address the blurring boundaries in our values, and the recapturing of life not as a convenient, chronological sequence of events well-placed in a storyline.

Let me suggest, through a list of features, although not in their order of importance, this Theatre of post-realism:

- **Experiential** rather than prescriptive, the tangible mediums reaching the viewer recreate meanings he emotionally and intellectually responds to, where each image, each sound, and each gesture evoke a corresponding experience. The viewer's real experiences (criss-crossing with that in the performance) influence his/her response. Meanings are thus defined in the viewer's own terms.
- **Collaborative**, as it takes power and decision-making away from the "center," thus empowering the artists involved in the process to act and decide on the creative expressions. When once the director was dictator and the artists were puppets, this New Theatre gives importance to the creative process as to the final production.
- **Participatory**, as it is collaborative, where the audience is active like one is involved in a forum and ritual (as is the Theatre's original intent). The audience decides as much as the artists do, where meanings are not spoon-fed and where discourse is active in the performance that has become like a ritual experience.
- **Innovative**, as the tangible mediums – images, sounds, actions, and music - in the dramatic form suit the meanings the performance suggests. As reality is not a convenient arrangement of events in chronology, so too is this new theatre that explores and shapes story-telling in new ways closer to the source of the reality than what conventional storytelling would enact.
- **Elemental**, where the bare tangibles are elements stripped to their essences. Like orange juice squeezed to its essence, this is the dramatic process of *distillation*. The superfluous is eliminated, the essential preserved, a cry, a whimper, a prolonged guffaw, a twist of the torso, the clasp of hands. These are signals that bare meaning. Beyond denotation, these meanings affect and incite emotional responses. In a series of actions, these signals evolve a larger meaning, a theme. Similar to an actor's *beat*, these related actions collage a puzzle of images to suggest a theme, even a narrative.
- **Symbolic**, as it presents images and sounds that extend their meanings beyond that of the literal. A performance involving semiotics illustrates signals and symbols as metaphors. As poetry, these dramatic devices capture more closely a reality than direct language.

- Fragmented but which parts paste a unified panorama, as in images that seem to be separate but in a collage will bring out a subject, as language (or utterances) that seem independent but which combination produces a coherent statement. As in a cultural system, idiosyncratic nuances have been broken down to their barest yet when pieced together produce a value system.
- Viable to interest an audience, to engross, enthrall, and stimulate so that this New Theatre's production can be supported by an audience wishing to be involved in this theatre's communal interactions.

These qualities and needs, therefore, influence the pedagogies we develop as theatre makers breach the conventions of theatre practice. Reinventions and innovations arouse greater interests to the theatre among our audiences, draw these audiences back to the theatre, and sustain the relevance in the functions theatre accomplishes in our Post Modern communities.

In Mindanao, the universities have the influence and resources to sustain theatre practice. Without surveying, I immediately discern that theatre practice concentrates in the campuses, these campuses' large student populations feeding the audience needs in the major state universities, in colleges, and in communities with theatres led by university-trained and -supplied artists. Take the case of the Mindanao State University campuses in Iligan, Marawi, and General Santos cities. Or the Davao, Zamboanga, and Cagayan de Oro community theatres nurtured by their Atencos and the universities within their peripheries. The features of a university-dominated theatre practice are common.

Four Processes

Our own experiments in the Integrated Performing Arts Guild (IPAG) have produced works that have been well attended and well complimented. These out-of-the-box works prove the viability of theatre practice in the university (the IPAG being hosted by the MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology) that extends its influence to the community. These productions describe how the academe trail blazes in developing new processes and novel creations.

Of IPAG's over 40 full-feature works, I cite four (4) of the more notable ones that tread on Post Modern aesthetics. These have had high degrees of success, in audience attendance, in critical acclamations, in fulfilling the purpose of expressing local lore and realities, in proving

the applicability of Asian experiences transcended through these forms, and in exploring new means for expressions. These plays are: *How the Women of Joaquin met Lawanen* (2001), *MingMing* (2004), *Reviving Sub-alternity* (2004), and *Uwahig* (2006).

These plays – besides their long runs and SRO audiences during our regular seasons - have had national and international exposures in prestigious festivals: *Reviving Sub-alternity* in the Asia Meets Asia Festivals (in collaboration with the Sovanna Phum company of Phnom Penn and the Waterfield company composed of aborigines of Taiwan) in Taipei and in Tokyo, *Uwahig* in the UNESCO ITI Theatre Olympics and the 9th Taipei Arts Festival, *MingMing* in the CCP Adindanao and WMSU's Tanghal, and *How the Women* as a feature in the NCCA Sambayan and Cebu Arts Festival.

With my advice and the assistance of the IPAG, other experiments using my theories of *distillation* have been produced by our artists. Euripedes' *Medea* was deconstructed by Amado Guinto (also a resident member of our company) as a fulfilment of a Stagecraft subject. Guinto, with another English major, Peter Mangubat, is developing a distillation-deconstruction process of a portion of the Maranao epic *Bantugan* as an undergraduate creative thesis.

The principles and creative procedures of these theories of production are detailed in a future book, *Directing From the Fringes*.

The "New Theatre" Works

MingMing, a non-linear narrative that essays the conflicts of three generations of a Moro clan, had to develop an acting technique where lines are not motivated by a chronological build up of emotions. This play's conception and writing challenged to thread the lines of dialogue and actions to weave a storyline. Even if initially the lines and situations seem to be a hodgepodge of sounds and images, the play had to engross to keep its audiences follow a common route.

The complications of a gamut of characters and events in three generations are condensed in an hour of show where time and space overlap, where our own "magic realism" is acceptable, where symbols appropriate the cultural signals of our Moro cultures, and where every detail would seem plausible to an audience reared in linear storytelling.

How the Women of Joaquin Met Lawanen juxtaposes the images of National Artist Nick Joaquin's women characters of his stories with that of the Maranao epic *Lawanen*. The production deconstructs his narratives by resituating his women in similar conditions that the staging

has condensed. Contrasts integrate in the same space and time opposing elements: male and female, the sun and the moon, fire and water, and Joaquin's empowered women vis-à-vis the servility of a traditional Lawanen, among others, to create a play which layers of contrasts overlap.

In a sense, this production parodies the eternal male-female opposites as it pokes fun at the contrasting symbols that distinguish each. Joaquin's "Tatarin" is focused as a re-enactment of "woman power," basic, organic, and seminal as the story's ritual qualities figuratively indicate.

At the core of ritual is the essence of Man— or more appropriately Woman—as inhibitions are thrown away, emotions are liberated, and the raw sensuality of humanity is revealed.

Reviving Subalternity has a more enigmatic form than *MingMing's* and *How the Women's* as this was produced in more challenging circumstances in less time. The collaborating artists had no common language, and as the final product was a collage of semiotic forms, so was the creative process that drew form from signs and gestures to complete. ('Subalternity' is a neologism coined from post-colonial politics that means the destruction of the minority. This gives you the idea of the work at hand and the manner by which work was conducted.) The audience were as much an active part of the whole process as were the performers who responded to stimulus activated differently by various sources—the audience, fellow actors, music, the environment—in every performance.

Popular among Asians is the Ramayana, thus this epic became the germ that spoke to the collaborators in common terms. Besides, the Hindu (and Asian) values of filial loyalty and retribution, the Rama-Sita-Ravana story implied ramifications into our shared political situations which were common grounds among the Cambodians, the Taiwanese, and the Filipinos.

Produced in classical dance (*Rorbam boran* for the Cambodians and the *pangalay* for us) using the *wayang kulit* (flat leather puppets), *kung fu*, on-the-spot composed music, and improvisations, the productions borrowed symbols that clarified a thematic meaning of political oppression, as Post Modern as the metaphors chosen by artists away from the 'centers of power' could suggest. A central symbol, besides the ruthlessness of Ravana and the helplessness of Sita, was the appearance of the Manobo peace goddess Mebuyan, the actress playing her (a Performance Art artist) drawing attention with an incongruous

soprano, her multiple nipples dripping pus and blood as she strode through space to herald the contamination of liberty.

More linear in its storytelling than *Reviving* yet similarly building from local lore was *Uwahig* (deconstructing from *Waig*, the Bukidnon word for "water"). The universally-common flood story in Genesis is the source, a story that is also in Bukidnon folklore, as it is in most Filipino folklore. *Uwahig* fused this genetic explanation of the world's beginning with the Maguindanao-Maranao epic of Indarapatra and Sulaiman who descend the heavens to help save earth from the Great Flood.

The two stories presented the possibilities of semiotics to highlight the earthly elements including water and fire. The production was a feast of images and sounds: the mythological monsters in 3-dimensional and flat puppets led by the water-sign crabs, the vine that wilts after Sulaiman's death, the flood, fire, the gibberish, the virus-infected personages, the semi-human characters, and the chanting Poet, among others.

The production process was itself a story where collaborating artists who lived in various parts of Mindanao bridged spaces through the Internet and digital technology. The concept I wrote processed through enhancements and suggestions through an e-group, which concept eventually became the scenario. In carefully defined measures which the scenario specified, our music was composed long distance by Mebuyan Peace Project under the direction of Ma. Cecilia Arriola. (The same music composing process was used in the development of *How the Women* which completed pieces in digital formats and their scores were emailed back to me by composer Josefino Toledo.) All the parts came together in 4 days before its world premiere at the CCP. The choreography was similarly indicated by specific notations, but choreographed movements were placed among segments of improvisations, the choreography working as posts to secure a cohesive composition.

The result was a disturbing collage that the audience was too awe-struck to respond to.

Filling the Post Modern gap

The plan calls for actions that will meet the theatre needs of our communities of our times. The plan roots theatre in schools, first, then stems out to the communities to sprout a way of life.

The harvest is the propagation of a practice that sips its vitality from the community of audiences that fertilizes this theatre. The seeding

is the task of universities' to sow large tracts to cultivate an active theatre culture.

The strategy maps out:

First, a clear perspective of the theatre practices in the area (culture and its traditions noted), a needs survey for potential artists, audiences and benefactors, the establishment of formal and non-formal venues for theatre's learning, opportunities for its sustained practice, and a study of theatre's feasibility as an economic activity;

Second, a system established to develop and put in place these plans which may include, among other strategies, the establishment of an Academy or satellite training centers, and a network of resources and artists;

Third, the popularization of theatre and its related genres by means attractive to business and to art, that which will not pit theatre against films, and that which appreciates theatre through its own terms of expressions appropriate to our times; and,

Finally, the sustenance of theatre practice ensured by this practice's relevance to our lives.

At this point, we can only dream of full houses and ritual experiences, of lively discourses and gratifying moments, of life's meanings opening up to us in forms that uplift our spirits, of communities gelled by the unifying forces of the theatre. The theatre prospects all of these for us. The landscape is inviting.

The ancients knew of Theatre's power. A community's sophistication is often gauged by the art works it nurtures and appreciates, certainly by its theatre that occupies the same high levels as its poetry, its arts, its literature, and its music. You – the universities – will get us there.

Selected Readings and Bibliography

Barba, Eugenio. *Paper Canoe: Guide to Theater Anthropology*. Edited by Richard Fowler, Odin Teatret: 1994.

12

- Delgado, Maria M. and Paul Heritage. *In Contact with the Gods? Directors talk theater*. Oxford: Manchester University Press, 1996.
- Fernandez, Doreen G. *Palabas: Essays on Philippine Theater History*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1996.
- Fernandez, Steven P.C. *Making Theatre: The Craft of the Stage*. Iligan City: IPAG, 2007.
- . "All the World's a Stage," *Likha Sining*, CCP Pilak Anniversary Anthology, 2005.
- . "Criss-Crossing Cultures: Contemporary Theater in Mindanao," (Fellowship Lecture delivered to the U.P. Creative Writing Center, November 18, 1993), also published in *Lectern*, MSU-IIT, June 1994.
- . "From Source to Show: Appropriating and Transcreating Indigenous Culture for Theatre," *Appropriating Indigenous Cultures in the Philippines: Festivals and Other Spectacles*, National Commission for Culture and the Arts, U.P., Quezon City, Oct. 19, 2006.
- . "Iligan's 'thriving' Theater Industry," *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 1999.
- . "More Questions to Question in Learning to Learn," *The Mindanao Forum*, vol. X, no. 1, MSU-IIT, Iligan City, June 1995.
- . "The IPAG Story: Growing With Iligan," *ANI*, Performing Arts issue (CCP-NCCA), 1997.
- . "The Word is the Beginning: Playwriting in Mindanao," (paper delivered to the National Playwrights Conference), Quezon City, February 15, 1997. (also published in *The Mindanao Forum*, vol. XIII, no. 1, June 1998).
- . "Theatre in the Regions: A Southern Philippine Perspective," *The Technician*, Vol. VIII, MSU-IIT, Iligan City, June 1990.

—. "We Are All Actors," Introduction to Drama, English 4 textbook, MSU-IIT, 2005.

Whitmore, Jon. *Directing Post Modern Theater*. The University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Reviews and Features

Abubakar, Pearlsha. "IPAG's MingMing: A Play of Hide and Seek," *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 28, 2004, p. A18.

Del Carmen, Allen. "MingMing's Story Beneath the Shroud: Secrets and Mysteries," *The Visayan Daily Star*, April 18, 2004.

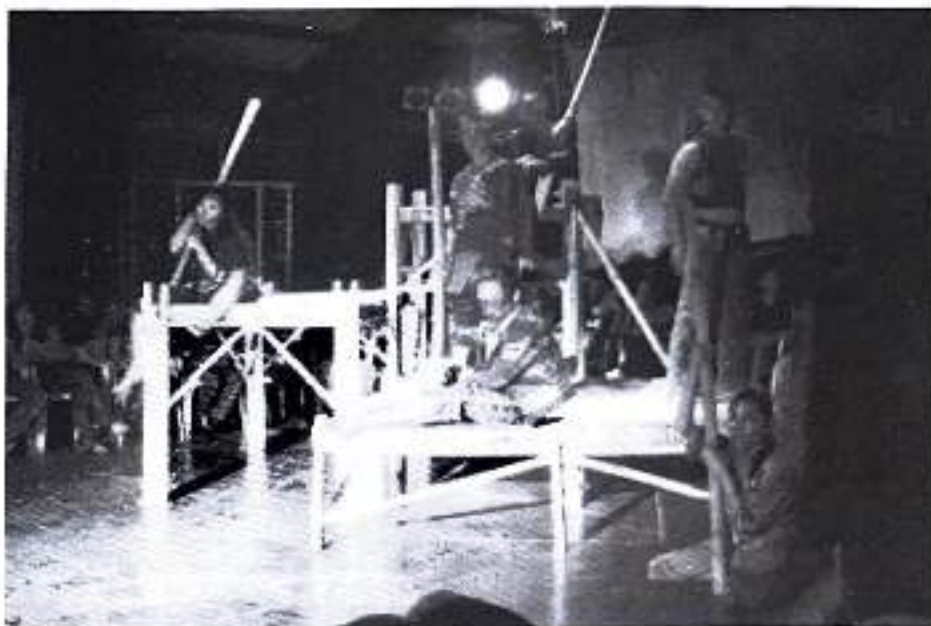
Fernandez, Steven P.C. "Asian Theater Rising," *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, May 16, 2005.

—. "Uncovering Uwahig," *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 19, 2006.

Marfori, Margarita. "Ming Ming," *Mindanao Times* (Davao City), May 16, 2004, p. 16.

Rollo, Cris. "Mingming: Caged" *Mindanews* (in his Column "Artspace," www.mindanews.com), July 18, 2004.

Ruiz, Ian Roy. "Ming Ming," *Golden Chronicle* (Cagayan de Oro City), June 29, 2004, p. 8.



Uwahig

a deconstruction of the Indarapatra epic and the Bukidnon flood tales
script and direction: STEVEN P.C. FERNANDEZ, DFA
choreography: Felimon Blanco, Melvin Pascubillo and the IPAG Creative Collective
music: Geejay Arriola and the Mebuyan Peace Project
production: IPAG and Mindulani, Inc.



"How the Women of Joaquin Met Lawanen"

production: IPAG
script and direction: Steven Patrick C. Fernandez, DFA
choreography: Nolly Ceballos
music: Chino Toledo



"Origami," a transcreation of the poem of Marj Evasco
direction, script, and music: Steven Patrick C. Fernandez, DFA
choreography: Leilani Monterola-Fernandez
production: IPAG



"Ming Ming" by Steven Patrick C. Fernandez, DFA
choreography: Leilani Fernandez and Amado Guinto
music: Steven P.C. Fernandez
production: IPAG