

Review:  
**Fernandez's Sarimanok –  
 a dance, drama, musical by IPAG**

Iligan City... **Sarimanok** (from *sari*, meaning colorful garments and *manok*, meaning chicken), the dance-drama-musical by **Steven Prince C. Fernandez** recently remounted by the Integrated Performing Arts Guild (IPAG) at the MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology (MSU-IIT) Gymnasium in late November this year explored the same theme – defy tradition and suffer the consequences.

Fernandez, in an interview emphasized that the title of his play is borrowed from the Maranao name of the legendary, colorful bird that has a feathered tail, and fish hanging from its beak, symbolic of prosperity and good fortune. The play, Steve said, is really an inspiration of Jonathan Livingston Seagull's quest for freedom from the materialistic world of seagulls by Richard Bach.

**Sarimanok, the play**

Sarimanok's (**Blesy Cece**) skill borne out of her training since birth in the imaginary world of Bayang Lawa is to catch fish in order to feed the hungry flock.

*Sarimanok! Pakainin mo kami ng isdang hinuli mo sa lawa. Nagugutom kami.*

She is assisted by Kaibigan (**Kaye Timonera**), child of one of three powerful Pinuno (**Miguel Perfecto**) of the land.

One day, a carefree Ibon so comfortably, and remarkably played by **John Michael Lagura** strays into Bayang Lawa and befriends Sarimanok. Ibon laughs at Sarimanok's role in Bayang Lawa by asking if she and her people are not fed up eating fish all day at all times.

Of course, Kaibigan, the apprentice to Sarimanok tells Ibon how self-sufficient Bayang Lawa is: *Marami kaming pagkain...*

To this, Ibon retorts telling her about the outside world:

*Sari-saring pagkain! Di lamang nakakapurgang isda. At kung isda man, sari-sari sa dagat, sa ilog, sa lawa.*

### Ibon teaches Sarimanok to fly

Ibon then succeeds in teaching an initially reluctant Sarimanok to fly. He convinces her to fly to other lands where there is a variety of food, and while in flight, to witness more exciting sights than her dreary birthplace, Bayang Lawa.

Here, while the flight of Ibon and Sarimanok is simulated in stylized body movements against a projected flight of birds on large scrims, with actors crossing downstage, alternately raising large, reflectorized cut outs of the sun, moon, and stars that glowed in the black (UV-A) light.

This razzle-dazzle, dream-like scene while delighting the young in the audience often brought many in the audience back to reality with the poor acoustics and feedback from suspended microphones.

### Sarimanok's punishment

Kaibigan acts as Sarimanok's conscience and tries to dissuade her from flying out of the village with Ibon again hence, neglecting her duty and threatening the survival of the flock.

In no time the Elders get wind of the situation. Her protests, of course, fall on deaf ears and Sarimanok receives many lashes in well-choreographed leaps, flapping of wings and the thrusting of beaks from well-crafted masks swift and deliberate.

Sarimanok, in other words, played to the visual-aural senses in well-defined *pangalay* steps combined with contemporary dance movements, the leaps and thumping of feet, arm and head movements by the flock onstage mesmerizing the audience. This led quickly to the tense moment when the Elders warned Sarimanok not to repeat her transgression, to conform, or else.

### Flying once more with Ibon

Enters Ibon once more in Bayang Lawa and convinces Sarimanok that to be free to fly is the essence of the good life, is to give free rein to the imagination. She does fly with him again this time without Kaibigan who refused to leave the village with the renegades.

As is predictable in closed societies, the inevitable happens: Ibon and Sarimanok are silenced forever and Kaibigan, her enculturation complete, takes over. Bayang Lawa moves on.

### Brechtian Technique

This part was not in the original play and, in the mature Fernandez, this new addition is aimed at symmetry of plot.



In the earlier version, the end came with the death of Sarimanok, Ibon and Kaibigan and, Ang Taong Nakamaskara played then by **Faisal Mambuay**, had electrified the audience at the Luce Auditorium when it was first performed there in 1981. In fact, in its first review published by the Manila Times, the late **Albert Faurot** dubbed the Sarimanok a *coup d' theatre*.

**Faisal** had dramatically taken off his mask and talked about the consequences of going against tradition – a critical technique of detachment popularized by the German dramatist **Bertolt Brecht**.

Ang Taong Nakamaskara today (played by **Kim Sumagang**) has an ubiquitous presence in the play – from the prologue with his singing, at some points, in *bayok* during crucial scenes; and, the final commentary using the Brechtian technique at the end of the play has become superfluous to the informed audience.

How effective this revival of an allegorical play of inflexible cultural laws like Sarimanok is debatable. It comes at a time too when the real world is changing through its modern means of transportation and communication, new discoveries in medicine and biological engineering that have opened opportunities to individuals from closed societies.

The success of Sarimanok, at this point, is primarily its entertainment value with its memorable, rhythmic dialog in Tagalog, original music from the Kulintangan Ensemble with the use of indigenous instruments (Kulintang, Talaandig drum, *Debskan*, *Gabang* and *Gandingan*), and the skilled playing of **Jhoanna Rodriguez** at the *kulintang*; the synthesizer operated by **Fernandez** who is also the play's librettist and composer; and, the live, pure singing of the chorus behind a large scrim.

Most significant of all is the dance ensemble, composed mostly of high school students whom **Fernandez** refers to as "part of our feeder program" since these students are from the Special Program for the Arts at the Sta. Filomena East National High School and the Iligan City National High School, as well as MSU-IIT freshmen.

Nonetheless, **Fernandez's** reprise of Sarimanok with a production grant from the National Commission for Culture and Arts (NCCA) may still prove to be a fine alternative for our showbiz-crazed people.

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