

The Word Is the Beginning: Playwriting in Mindanao

STEVEN P.C. FERNANDEZ


*"Stress should be laid on raising standards, but to do so one-sidedly and exclusively, to do so excessively, is a mistake."
Literature for the Masses, MAO TSE-TUNG*

The WORD is the beginning. Where else may this be true than on stage where the uttered text or the images that jump out of the page grow from the WORD. Written or oral, danced or spoken, ideas and feelings are made palpable by words.

In Mindanao where literature is more widely oral than published, where theater is more improvisation than structured, more dance and music than dialogue, playwriting takes another dimension. Playwriting as craft is "imported," and to Mindanao's many theater practitioners, irrelevant.

This is our starting point. We deal with playwriting as a new discipline.

I base my observations from my stints as a theater practitioner and playwright based in Mindanao in the last 22 years, as a student of Philippine Theater and culture, and as a critic and resident panelist-playwright of the Iligan National Writers' Workshop in the last 5 years, the Mindanao Writers' Workshop in Davao, and various other writing programs in the country.

 STEVEN P.C. FERNANDEZ, holds an M.A. in Philippine Studies, major in the Humanities, from the University of the Philippines. The artistic Director of IPAG, he is that rare breed of long-haired bird that will soon be extinct.

The output is dismaying. Generally, these workshops have reviewed only five plays written in Mindanao: an adaptation of a Nick Joaquin story, three one-act plays set during the Japanese occupation, and a full-length historic drama. To my knowledge, only two of these have seen production.

I am not sure if the U.P. Creative Writing Center or the Silliman-Dumaguete Workshop has accepted other plays from Mindanao. Although the Palanca has awarded a few Mindanao-oriented plays, I know of at least one that has been staged which, personally, was an excruciating experience.

By its nature as a discipline in craftsmanship (meaning: formal, studied, structured), playwriting may be considered a new, introduced discipline. In Mindanao, where creative expressions are evolved from long indigenous traditions expressed widely in chants, music, and dance, the craft of the playwright is an "importation" – academic and foreign. Its techniques still to be learned, its craftsmanship to be acquired.

Many factors lead today's playwright to accept the emerging conventions that ultimately decide a good play.

There is the growing urban, cosmopolitan community – exposed to electronic media and global trends – that is the evolving audience of the contemporary theater. This developing audience – whether we accept them or not – will ultimately decide the kinds of plays they will patronize and the theaters they will support. Playwriting, thus, crystallizes a willing correspondence, a bondage, with this emerging audience.

The Theaters of Mindanao

Mindanao hosts two general types of theaters: **theater-as-staged** and **theater-as-process**. The first sees theater as an end product, going through a process of structured production, using conventions of studied staging, produced within a limited time span in a limited space called the stage, and performed primarily to entertain. The second fulfills communal functions, as ritual, and focuses primarily on the process to meet communal needs for integration and defense. In the latter, audience and performers merge. It does not have the need for a playwright.

Playwriting therefore hews more closely to the first. It is within this "classical" (or "anti-classical") convention that dictates the criteria of playwriting. Playwriting will necessarily carry rules. These rules state that plays are written

with the end in view of its production in a stage separated from an audience. Its "standards" are set: the "well-made" play or a "deconstruction" of its "classical" precepts as: (or the absence of it), character development, organic unity, conflict and confrontation, complications, choices and options, foreshadowing, and the like—Or the opposites of the above.

Within these criteria obviously, our Mindanao playwrights are deficient. For how far is Ibsen, Chekov, or even a Brecht from a Bapa Salilang, the *bayok* chanter, keeper of the *salsilah*?

But the reality remains: we have adapted the staging and theater technologies of the West therefore we have to learn the craft of their playwrights.

The Need for Plays

There is the pressing urgent need for plays. Materials are plentiful in Mindanao: novel, exciting, engrossing materials sourced from the wealth of Mindanao's peoples and experiences. But transplanting these materials into the printed page for theaters to use is utterly lacking. Because of this necessity, many of us have become playwrights (who are also directors, designers, and administrators at the same time). I too learned to write plays because of this need.

Like the other theater disciplines, the craft of playwriting had to be acquired.

The changing economic, political, and cultural conditions play a large part in shaping this craft. In appreciating these conditions, one can produce more effective productions. These conditions are today's playwrights' realities:

1. *Theater in a defined time span.* The contemporary audience can only digest so much play time (theater has evolved as an activity of leisure, mostly).
2. *Theater in a defined limited space.* Events unfurl in a stage vis-à-vis the street or open spaces of earlier millieus.
3. *Theater in dynamic mediums.* Transformation from a predominantly oral medium to a more visual one further conditions other elements like pacing, the situation of character and events, dramaturgy, and the like.
4. *Theater in transforming communities.* There is the distinctive shift in intentions from ritual to entertainment functions, and interests have grown from audiences in schools to those in the larger communities.

Patterns in Playwriting

By their contents and processes of production, Mindanao plays follow these general patterns:

1. Original scripts either based from regional indigenous sources, or from common domestic experiences in various theatrical forms, usually in Western-oriented conventions; (**models:** *Datu Matu*, *Ranaw: Isang Alamat*, *Mga Kwentong Maranao*, *Tud Bulol*, *Sinalimba*, *Sulambi*, *Kawing*, *Patas*, and most other Mindanao-oriented plays]
2. Adapted/translated scripts (Cebuano or the local dialects) from the original Filipino, English, or classic plays: [**models:** *Usa Ka Damgo* from "Midsummer Night's Dream," *New Yorker Kuno* from "New Yorker in Tondo," *Kwadradong Paraiso* from "Paraisong Parisukat," *June Bride*, and the like]
3. Plays recalled and rewritten after the production has been completed (developed from collective efforts and improvisations); [**Models:** *Yakapin Ang Kris*, *Mga Kwentong Mindanao*, Kaliwat's playback performances]

Prospects

Output of plays has been small, and their *stageability* impossible. The problem of playwriting in the whole country is also the problem of playwriting in Mindanao. There is a lot of emerging theater groups groping for scripts to use. In the dearth of *stageable* plays, these groups develop their own scripts. But with the lack of craft, the play, and ultimately the production, fails. Losing their audiences, these groups do a disservice to theater.

In our theaters, there are more performers than writers. Playwriting is a desolate profession.

What can be done? Perhaps we can start by organizing more workshops more widely accessible to all sectors — similar to that which PETA did for its basic integrated arts programs that have sprouted theater groups and enthusiasts all over. Then we need opportunities and venues for critiquing and for developing new playwrights with new exciting ideas. A play, like poetry, may never be appreciated without its reading. Workshops will allow plays to be read and criticized. One needs to imbibe that attitude that any play is a work in progress. It is almost complete in production which work ceases to be the writer's own once it is pro-

duced.

Then we can have guilds – playwrights’ groups – cohesively networked where playwrights have the opportunities for sharing, exposure, and further criticism.

Most importantly, plays need to have a theater to realize them. If production is impossible then perhaps one may organize a circle of friends who will read plays to explore possibilities for production and “stageability.”

Woe it is now because theater groups do not have playwrights to write for them. Conversely, playwrights do not have theater groups to mount their works.

The last is our theater most woeful lament because everything begins with the WORD.