

OPINION & FEATURES

The President Who Would Be Queen

by Volt Contreras
Inquirer.net

A satirical play—about a woman president toying with the idea of establishing a monarchy to save her troubled nation—could have brought the house down at Monday night's (Sept. 1) award ceremonies of the 2008 Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature.

But organizers decided weeks ahead to break tradition and chose not to stage this year's grand prize winner in the Filipino One-Act Play category, purportedly because of its "political content."

Floy Quintos, the winning playwright, on Tuesday confirmed the organizers' decision not to mount his work, titled *Ang Kalungkutan ng Mga Reyna*, but said he had no complaints at all.

"They decided not to do it because of what they perceived to be the political content of



the play," Quintos said when reached on the phone.

"I respect the decision and I'm still grateful that it won. That's the prerogative of the producers," said Quintos, who noted that it

was also his fourth time to win a Palanca. He said he had earlier also served as a judge in the country's most prestigious literary contest.

Reached on the phone and told of Quintos' remarks on the reason his play was not performed, a coordinator for the award-giving

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The power of words

REMEMBER the saying, "Stick and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me?" Most people think they're only words, but in reality, these jumbled mix of letters and sentences are a force to our lives.

Words create impressions, images and expectations. They build psychological connections and influence how we think—how others think. Since these thoughts determine actions, a powerful connection between words and the results of those actions. So writing, then, is an important vehicle for our words.

EDITORIAL

Writers, authors and/or poets have moved people, launched wars and changed history through the pieces they have written. Honors like the Pulitzer and our local Palanca Awards are given to those who have created something relevant and meaningful out of words we sometimes take for granted.

This is why we also have to be careful about the words we choose. Poorly chosen words can kill enthusiasm, impact self-esteem, lower expectations and hold people back. However, well chosen ones can motivate, offer hope, create vision, impact thinking and bring positive results.

Words are things, and even what seems to be a small drop of ink falling on paper, produces something—an idea—that can make thousands, perhaps millions, think. ■

Winds of change

IT wasn't just fireworks that lit the sky as Barack Obama accepted his presidential nomination, it was his words too. The same night 45 years before, Martin Luther King had delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech, a speech that went on to achieve iconic status in the world and became a virtual war cry of the oppressed. Obama made no reference to his race in his own speech, the one group of people King dreamt would one day find the Promised Land. A dream that had just come true in Obama, resplendent on an outdoor stage, the glare of the spotlight trained on him, the star of the show. Maybe not even in King's wildest dreams.

Obama made no reference to his race, but he spoke of delivering a country from another epic oppression into the Promised Land. He spoke of a country—no, of a world—that had been laid low by the Burning Bush, the burning being literal in Iraq and elsewhere. He spoke of a country—no, of a world—that had been gripped by the hand of tyranny, where dissent had been silenced, where freedom had been replaced by paranoia, where dreams had turned to nightmares. He spoke of ending that rule, of turning a country—no, a world—around. He spoke of lowering taxes, of ending the war in Iraq, of stopping American dependence on Middle East oil. But more than that, he spoke of the will to change and the courage to hope. He too had a dream, a dream of what America could be, a dream of what America would be.

Will it come true as well?

Well, I figure the only thing that stands in the way of Obama and the White House right now is an assassination. That is the scary part, the whole scene reminiscent of what happened to King not long after he delivered his speech proposing to deliver a people from slavery. Hillary Clinton, despite her own brilliant outing the day before, gathering her horde to throw their weight behind her former rival, did not do the world a favor by reminding it some months ago of what happened to Robert Kennedy before he got to the finish line.

I myself believe that the American elections won't be close at all and will be a repeat of 1960, which pitted John F. Kennedy against Richard Nixon. Everybody thought that would be close too, but JFK just ran Nixon down. The same themes are there: new vs. ancient, young vs. old, change vs. status quo, peace vs. war, tolerance vs. bigotry, understanding vs. fear, hope vs. despair, freedom vs. oppression, a kinder and gentler America vs. a needful and war-mongering one. The coming election is wrought along the same mythical, larger-than-life, lines. It will have the same result.

A little closer to home, Anwar Ibrahim looks headed to topple the ruling National Front which has ruled Malaysia since its independence from Britain in 1957. Nothing short of a political miracle since he was given up for dead some years back. Anwar, a vocal critic of Mahathir, was forced to resign from Parliament in 1999 after he was charged with sodomy and was jailed for six years upon conviction. His wife, Wan Azizah Wan, ran in his place and won a couple of terms. Special elections were held after she vacated her place last Tuesday and Anwar won it back with a landslide.

Anwar's victory takes on a special significance coming on the heels of the opposition's resounding victory in the polls last March. He now leads a coalition of opposition parties and needs only 30 more defections from the ruling party to lead a government to bring down the one currently held by Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmed Badawi. He vows to get it by next month.

He vows to liberalize Malaysia and turn it into a full-blown democracy. I met Anwar's wife and daughter when they came here many years ago, seeking support for him after he was jailed. If I recall right, Azizah met with Cory, a symbolic meeting that cast Anwar as the Malaysian Ninoy to Mahathir's Marcos. The sodomy charge was clearly meant not just to neutralize Anwar but to humiliate him, to bring him down before the public. Better to kill the myth than the man. It didn't work. Malaysia's highest court reversed the verdict in 2004, finding him innocent of the charge. His comeback has been fairly meteoric since then. "There is a mounting sense of inevitability about his impending succession [as prime minister]," said The Star.

And of course only last month, Pervez Musharraf resigned as Pakistan's prime minister after he met with a debacle at the polls and was threatened with impeachment.

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On winning the first time (or better yet, the first first prize)

THE 58th edition of the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature took place last Sept. 1 at the Peninsula, as usual, and let me be the first to congratulate my new deputy director at the UP Institute of Creative Writing, Jose Claudio "Butch" Guerrero (yes, another Butch), for winning first prize in the essay in English category. It's also Butch's first Palanca, so coming in first has to be a double thrill for him. I mention Butch not only because we work together in the same office (he's also a faculty member of the UP English department, as well as my student in my graduate fiction workshop), but also because any writer's first Palanca reminds me of my own, 33 years ago, when I tied for second place in the short story in English, setting me down a road I'm still traveling on.



PENMAN

Butch Dalisay

A Palanca (or any other prize, for that matter) is a wonderful thing to have as a young man or woman seeking early validation of his or her writing abilities, and even as an old man still wondering if he has what it takes to excite a difficult and discerning reader. But like I often remind my students, it's just one way—and maybe not even the best one—of establishing one's credentials as a writer; the ultimate proof lies in one's readership. At some point in a writing life, prizes matter much less than publication (and then perhaps, toward the very end of things, they matter again).

But there's something about the first time, the first prize (or better yet, the first first prize) that sends a lifelong rush through the system. I know now, looking back on that first Palanca, that I may have gotten lucky; the judges were in a generous mood and had

split first, second, and third prizes down the line. I don't even have a copy of that story, a fanciful piece set in the pre-colonial past titled *Agcalan Point*; it was never published, and I never thought of including it in any of my books, because it was an engaging tale but not particularly well written. (I was 21, in my thunder-and-lightning phase, and besotted with exotic effects.)

But it was enough to give me the lift I needed to pursue writing with a passion. In those days, they held the Palanca Awards ceremony in the old La Tondeña building on Echague, but they didn't skimp on the trimmings: I remember the swan carved out of glassine ice, and bringing home a hand-lettered certificate along with a check for P2,500, which I plunked down in partial payment for a 1963 Datsun Bluebird, my first car and a pretty piece of junk.

I walked on air for months afterward, and couldn't wait for the next Palanca deadline to leave my stamp on Philippine literature. You can imagine my dismay and despair when, with crushing regularity, I joined the Palancas for the next four years—and lost. It wasn't until 1980 that I would win again—for a play in Filipino. In the early '80s I hit my stride and began writing stories one after the other, and the sheer enjoyment of writing leavened the torment of awaiting the Palanca results (delivered then by telegram, so I scanned the horizon far and wide in late August for the solitary figure of the PT&T or RCPI messenger biking his way up the road).

And so my congratulations go to this year's batch of Palanca winners, especially the first-timers, with a gentle reminder: enjoy the evening and get drunk on the company and the champagne, and then, tomorrow morning, start thinking about your first book and your most difficult reader. ■

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