

OPINION & FEATURES

Bashing the Philippines?

The Commission on Human Rights has come out in support of the latest US State Department report on the state of human rights in the Philippines. Among other things, the report notes that corruption and the slow pace of the administration of justice have set back the promotion of human rights in the country.

The statement was issued as pro-administration congressmen accused Washington of systematically bashing the Philippines amid calls for the abrogation of the Visiting Forces Agreement due to the controversy over custody of convicted rapist US Marine Lance Cpl. Daniel Smith. The congressmen said the World Bank report on bid-rigging in WB-funded projects was also part of Philippines-bashing by the United States.

The World Bank announced the debarment of seven contractors in connection with the bid rigging before the controversy over Smith erupted. And the State Department country report on human rights

is an annual thing.

Instead of attributing sinister motives to foreign reports and administrative sanctions, lawmakers should work to improve the promotion of human rights. Congress should help professionalize the military and police so cops and soldiers will stop resorting to extrajudicial shortcuts in keeping the peace and protecting the nation from threats. Congress can also give more resources and teeth to the Commission on Human Rights so it can carry out its mandate better.

The collapse of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986 did not lead to an end in human rights violations. Just 11 months after democracy was restored, farmers holding Mendiola, leaving 13 dead. Since 1986, hundreds of militant activists, legal professionals and journalists have been killed nationwide, with government forces as key suspects in many of the cases. The number of unexplained killings and disappearances dropped dramatically in the past two years, but arbitrary arrests and detention remain common, as the CHR itself has confirmed.

The US country report did not say anything about human rights in the Philippines that most Filipinos don't already know. When the international community takes note of a problem in the Philippines, the proper response is to see it as a challenge to deal better with the problem. (*Philstar.com*)

GUEST EDITORIAL



Photo courtesy of Philstar.com

His Signatures: R and Q...

"The pattern of our lives is essentially circular. We must be open to all points of the compass; husband, children, friends, home, community, stretched out, exposed, sensitive like a spider's web to each breeze that blows, to each call that comes. How desirable and how distant is the ideal of the contemplative, artist, or the saint—the inner inviolable core, the single eye." - Anne Morrow Lindbergh



RHIZOMES

Prosy Dela Cruz J.D.

stands for respect for audience and respect for the artist. A full measure of respect both for the artist and the audience, and all sided respect to all is what motivates Ted Benito, a community-trained director and producer, who is now inching his way to the core of the mainstream, and soon, a red carpet walk to the Oscars as a nominee, a forecast I boldly believe will happen.

But he did not start there. He started to audition at age six, accompanied by his beloved mother, Fe Israel Benito, for a part as one of the royal children in the *King and I*, and the tickets they received to go to see Yul Bryner perform became one of the imprints of Ted's unlikely career in the entertainment business.

Q stands for quality, Ted Benito's signature, that comes out in every performance that I have watched him act, whether it is at UCLA's Philippine Cultural Night, or in what he directs, as community gala fundraisers for FASGI, SIPA and of course, our beloved FAL, Filipino American Library, or as producer of theatrical pieces: *Dogeaters*, *Miracle in Rwanda* or working with talents like Michael and Ray Paulo, Martin Nievera, Charmaine Clamor, Jennifer Paz or Lea Salonga in their own concerts and with Dante Basco, Tia Carrere, Lou Diamond Phillips, Stephanie Reese and Michael Copon at the Filipino American Library galas.

He is the first to admit that he did not consider this as his life's pathway, until he was introduced by Enrique Delacruz to Fritz Friedman, Senior Vice President for Sony Pictures Entertainment, who empowered him to direct the first fundraiser for the Assembly for Justice for Filipino World War II veterans, and right after, the first

Spirit Awards Gala fundraiser for the Filipino American Library.

He admits he is not easily star-struck, unlike yours truly, who hopes one day to meet Sidney Poitier and Oprah in person, and perhaps this unimpressable trait of his enables him to stay focused and capable of reining in arrogant, stubborn egos of artists and get them to collaborate towards an ultimate outcome, to perform well for an audience! Well, not all artists are arrogant, don't get me wrong. But, when someone's reputation is on the line, or their name is a brand, sold to the public as a commodity, their ego sometimes gets in the way.

But not in Ted Benito's productions. I asked him what enables the smooth harmonies as his production outcomes. He explained it quite simply, that he shares his vision with the artists, and then, how the artist's role fit in within the larger picture. He stressed that a clear vision is very important for each production to be staged with success for the audience to appreciate.

I went to see The Angelos, a Philippine-based talent of four male singers, a talent brought to the attention of Ted Benito by the Los Angeles Consul General Mary Jo Bernardo Aragon. During the first half of the program, I was beginning to twitch in my seat, annoyed by the Angelos' pandering for applause, without giving their all yet to singing. They were quite self-conscious and their performances were conditioned by the audience's applause. As the audience clapped, so did their singing intensified. I did not doubt there would be a turnaround, after all, this is Ted Benito's production, I silently told myself. An erratic display of quality is certainly not his signature. It is rather an ascending display of excellence, artistic rigor with diversity.

After intermission, a dramatic, qualitative switch happened. The performers belted out their tunes, no longer focused on applause, with less self-consciousness, and with more emotional awareness of the songs' lyrics, feeling them, and like magic or a turned on-switch, the audience responded. The audience repeatedly called out "Bravo! Bravo! Bravo!", particularly after hearing them sing in various languages: Italian, Portuguese, English, Spanish, Tagalog and other dialects, Kapangpangan, Ilocano and Visayan. There is nothing like listening to songs in your natural-born languages and dialects. It was like coming home to one's island birthplace, as if soothing lullabies, serenading

one's soul.

Behind the scenes, the Angelos confided that the James Armstrong Theater was the best venue they had performed in, for in another state outside of California, their producer booked them to sing at a restaurant where the lights were rigged as if a spotlight, and a white curtain as a divider, as if the curtain sufficiently blocked off the clanging of forks and spoons to plates by the diners. Was that a full measure of respect to treat artists?

Hence, when faced with a challenge to sing at the James Armstrong Theater, the Angelos at first clammed up, then relaxed, and ultimately performed well to a standing ovation with over the top calls of bravos!

When you respect the artist, the audience is respected as well, and both have a memorable and a quality experience. Such is the secret of Ted Benito's success: a full measure of respect for the artist, and a full measure of respect for the audience!

(To be continued in this week's Weekend edition.)



Photo taken by Michael Anthony Hermogeno, courtesy of Ted Benito.

Right to reply



THERE'S THE RUB

Conrado de Quiros

MANILA—I remember again what I told my friends at a conference abroad the other year. My friends, who were journalists from various Islamic countries, many of whom labored from all sorts of restrictions in their chosen profession, expressed their envy of the Philippines which they saw as enjoying a free press.

I said our problem was a curious one, and not altogether the lighter one. True enough, I said, we were free to say anything in newspapers and radio and TV that could be backed up by evidence (we had libel laws) and sometimes even with the lack of it (we had outfits that could do with the free advertisement libel brought). Unfortunately, nobody minded it. The press is free to expose officials as crooks, but the crooks remain free to continue to steal anyway. Certainly they remain free.

At least in older—now forgotten—times, public officials bristled at being called *buayas* (crocodiles), which compelled them to be a little more circumspect in their theft, thereby limiting its scale. The press exposes or calls public officials crooks, and the crooks laugh all the way to the bank. Who cares about being called a crook when it entitles you to more loot while being called a whistle-blower merely entitles you to a term in jail?

It's an incredible situation where words no longer seem to have any visible effect on reality. That is the sound of a country losing its soul.

I remember this in light of the "right of reply" bill sponsored by Nene Pimentel which has passed the Senate with no one opposing it and which is due to pass the House anytime now. Frankly, I can't understand why my friend persists in ramming through this unmitigated

folly. There's nothing more perverse and ill-timed.

We've just seen one of the most horrendous spectacles of official wrongdoing ever to be sprung before us—quite a feat given the procession of epic wrongdoing that has passed before our eyes—in the form of the World Bank implicating the First Gentleman in a rip-off hatched by three WB-funded Filipino firms. The public went up the hill to call for heads to fall, the press went (down) to town calling the implicated companies and officials crooks, or as much so as libel laws allowed. The result of all this sound and fury was to signify—and to prove my point above—nothing.

Well, not altogether nothing. It also signified comedy, or atrocity, as befitted the chair of committee heading the investigation, Miriam Santiago. Stung by the uprising, Santiago promptly climbed onto her white horse and ran after ... the World Bank. I myself can only imagine the UN congratulating itself happily for not making her an international jurist, if only because her sponsor, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, sponsored her. If several Serbian villages accused another of their former leaders of war crimes, she would have mounted the same high horse and ridden after ... the villagers. At least Somalian jurists, one of which the UN picked in her stead, know which direction to face, or which side of the horse is the head and which the ass.

Pimentel's bill is a variation of this. Our problem is that despite having a free press that does not fail to call crooks crooks, our crooks do not fail to get away. The obvious solution to everyone, including the truant kids in my neighborhood, is to not let the crooks get away. The solution to Pimentel is to not let the press get away.

That is what his bill does, whatever his intentions, whatever his motives. There is nothing innocent about it. The Inquirer has already pointed out the lunacy of his bill in its editorials. I've done the same in several columns in past months. Suffice it to say here that this bill

will stamp out criticism entirely. Yes, entirely. That is so because of a very real fear on the part of media. That fear is not the "chilling effect" that many journalist organizations are citing. If Filipino journalists have shown anything, it is courage over and beyond the call of duty, or the lure of meager pay. That fear is being reduced to becoming the advertising or PR firms of public officials.

Why on earth should media be scared per se about officials answering back? Media have always shown a higher IQ, if not higher moral standards (barring the crooks in media, who arguably thrive as well), than public officials. But you now criticize a public official, and whether he or she is guilty or not, he or she will have the right to occupy space in your news. The guiltier, the louder. Or worse, the lengthier. With elections in particular round the corner, every official who gets criticized, will get to strut his hour upon the stage, or its equivalent in media. That is still another variation on government's favorite pastime of rewarding the guilty and punishing the innocent.

If you're a newspaper or a radio or TV station, you will balk at criticizing a public official, or indeed even praising him or her—they can always construe it as faint praise—out of the absolute, terrifying, spine-tingling fear not of him refusing you but of him robbing you of precious space. Still another favorite government pastime, robbing. Space that could, and should, be used for legitimate news, which you now have to allocate to illegitimate, or unpaid, PR. Yet still other favorite government pastimes, fomenting illegitimacy and not paying. That is the sound of news dying. Or being strangled.

However you slice it, and dice it, and spice it, the "right of reply" sucks, and sucks big time. Of course Malacañang says GMA means to block it, as she will not have the media curtailed in any way. That makes her out to be a staunch champion of press freedom, to which every journalist has every right to reply in the gravest and solemnest of terms:

Hahahahahahaha! (*Inquirer.net*)



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