

# His Signatures are R and Q

In a prior issue of *Asian Journal*, I wrote how Ted Benito 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 Brynner perform became one of the imprints of Ted's unlikely career in the entertainment business, followed by his community involvements, from Samahang Pilipino's PCN (Pilipino Cultural Night) and his early productions, *Dogeaters*, *Miracle in Rwanda*, all because he said yes to being involved in community—initiated events by Alliance for Justice, Filipino American Library, SIPA, etc. This is the second part of that article.

I interviewed him recently to give voice to his gained insights, as well as to pass on some of his learned lessons to those in the community who are producers and directors in training and in the making. Here is what Ted generously shared:

*AJ Press: Describe how you felt in each of the successful productions you managed.*

*Ted: Songs For A New World* with Jennifer Paz is my “baptism by fire” production...this holds a very dear place in my heart. This production really taught me a lot, it paved the way for me to meet other artists and opened a lot of doors. As executive producer, I felt obligated to see that the show got up, ran well and more importantly, that it was noticed by the theater community of Los Angeles. Because it went on to get many ovation nominations, and considering from a first time producer, I was flattered and delighted that people took notice of the work and artists that I had assembled. It was a tough going at first but in the end, I don't think I would be where I am today without having gone through that production.

In *Dogeaters*, the initial co-production with SIPA came as a real shocker because after Jon Lawrence Rivera (director) and I were approached to do a play, something perhaps to inaugurate the space we had intended on simply doing a smaller play with a much smaller cast. Somehow the idea to do *Dogeaters* was born out of our combined energy and vision to go for the best. I got a chance to meet so many talented Filipino-American actors during the audition process and then had the chance to watch their craft unfold during the actual production. I felt good about *Dogeaters* because people who saw the play (the initial play at SIPA) came to support the play when it went to the Kirk Douglas Theater with the Center Theatre Group, one of Los Angeles' mainstream theatrical production centers.

In *Jazzmopolitan*—I have grown up always listening to jazz music in some form or another...bossa nova, smooth jazz, vocalese jazz, bebop or cool jazz. So when the chance to promote Filipino



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Prosy Dela Cruz J.D.

jazz artists, on my terms and in the manner in which I envisioned, I leaped at the opportunity. I would like to carry on the brand name *Jazzmopolitan* and use it as an annual event separate and apart from the Filipino American Library. That way, we can invite more mainstream jazz artists and vocalists to appear and still raise monies for charity. As producer and director, I felt very proud of the performers that evening because it put them out there before a more diverse audience: Michael and Ray Paulo, Mon David, Charmaine Clamor, Three of a Kind and Becca Godinez.

I have enjoyed producing and directing all of the Filipino American Library Galas that have occurred over the last 8 years. That singular event has brought me closer to artists that I would never had met otherwise and afforded me the ability to put on some memorable performances for the community. More importantly, I feel a great sense of pride knowing that the Gala has enabled the library to continue its service in fulfilling its mission.

In *I Shall Return* - the concept of a star-studded concert to raise funds for the victims of the Leyte landslide was percolating about 6 weeks before the actual event. At 3 weeks before the event, the executive producer asked me to direct the show so my legs buckled at the challenge to put together a show with 10 performers and 10 emcees, all of whom were high caliber singers and entertainers, including Martin Nievera and Mig Aysa. I wrote the script, included all the technical cues, worked with the artists and worked with the technical crew, both here in Los Angeles and the Philippines, and quite literally, the event came together on the day of performance. The greatest indication of the success of that project was that the capacity audience stayed for the entire show and thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

I think my best work has revolved around projects with Martin Nievera, Lea Salonga, Becca Godinez, Jennifer Paz and Jon Lawrence Rivera. These artists have been a thorough joy to work with whether it be in live concerts or in cd recordings. They know their talent; they know their audiences and they know that they can count on me to see a project through. There is a great sense of camaraderie when I have the opportunity to work with them. Of course, that is true for others as well. Since the majority of my productions have been fundraisers and benefits, they understand the restrictions placed on me in terms of budget and time and they are very accommodating of such arrangements.

*AJ Press: What are your future projects that I can talk about with full disclosure?*

*Ted: I am currently involved in a few projects that would raise funds for Gawad Kalinga. I also have been granted the Ford Summer Partnership*



Martin Nievera with Ted Benito.

Photo courtesy of Ted Benito, from Mygringos.com

and I will be producing and directing the first (hopefully) of an annual Hawaiian/Polynesian show featuring talent from Hawaii and the South Pacific. Then, there's *Jazzmopolitan* for the Filipino American Library. I will be working with Dante Basco in the coming months as he has a wonderful book of poetry that he will be launching.

I do hope to help out artists like Camile Velasco and Apl.de.Ap with their solo cd projects in the near future. I'm hoping to help out with stage productions that are being planned with East West players (*The Last 5 years* and *Imelda*, which is debuting in New York) and *Ruby, tragically Rotund* with Playwrights' Arena and the Latino Theatre Company at LATC.

More importantly, I am looking forward to the all-filipino casts of *A Memory*, *a Monologue*, *a Rant and a Prayer* and *The Vagina Monologues* (March 7 at The Aratani Theater in Little Tokyo). I'm trying to bring an awareness to stopping violence towards women and children and raise monies for Bantay Bata and The Center for Pacific Asian family.

In this line of work, what can be (and I stress “can be”) fun are the unexpected projects that come along whether it be running a red carpet (as I did for both the Marian Rivera/Ding Dong Dantes concert and the Manny Pacquiao after party) or helping to produce theater (there are two fantastic theatrical productions featuring Filipino casts coming down the pipeline), it's all part of the puzzle.

*AJ Press: What do you wish to impart to those that want to follow your footsteps?*

*Ted: First learn...learn about the business, learn about artists, learn about the technical aspects of*

theater/television/film, learn about the community, learn about audiences, learn about marketing and advertising, learn about almost everything you can think of that relates to both the production side and the performance side of the business. and the best place to do that is hands on experience.

Second, build both your resume and your rolodex. Five years ago, if someone told me that I would be co-producing a concert for Martin Nievera, a recording for Jennifer Paz featuring Lea Salonga or staging *Dogeaters*, I would have committed them to a mental asylum but through all these projects that taught me about producing and directing, its really the relations that you build and maintain that matter.

Third, when the community calls...answer. if it's an organization that needs help dissemination information via a press release, write it. if it's a church doing a fundraiser, help them. if it's a festival that needs talent, provide them the artists. we need to help each other in order for all to succeed.

Through each production, the important thing to remember is why you're doing this in the first place. So, have a mission statement or some written goal that you can work by.

And my self-appointed mission statement is to promote, present and produce the talents of Filipinos in all entertainment genre, that's been my guiding light and reminds me of the big picture.

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# On arresting a sitting president

SO it is possible after all. A sitting president has been ordered arrested for human rights violations committed during a counterinsurgency campaign. On Wednesday this week, the International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague ordered the arrest of Sudanese President Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir as an “indirect co-perpetrator, for intentionally directing attacks against an important part of the civilian population—murdering, exterminating, raping, torturing and forcibly transferring large numbers of civilians, and pillaging their property.”

The ICC held al-Bashira—president of the Republic of Sudan, commander in chief of its Armed Forces, and head of the ruling party—responsible for the design and implementation of the war against the rebels. The court also held him to account for the acts by the notorious militia that carried out the most hideous acts, because they were still part of the “state apparatus.” (Remember how our government has similarly washed its hands on extrajudicial killings by pointing the finger at anti-communist vigilantes.)

The Hague court had earlier issued arrest warrants for two of al-Bashir's men, but al-Bashir not only shielded them from arrest but in fact promoted one of them to a cabinet post—as minister for humanitarian affairs in charge of investigating human rights violations! This, the ICC found, was part of al-Bashir's “denial of [the] crimes and cover up, as well as shifting responsibility to others [that were] characteristic of planning and perpetrating this type of crimes.”

William Pace, convener of the Coalition for the International Criminal Court, a network of civil society organizations in 150 countries working for a fair, effective and independent ICC, said: “The president of Sudan is now a fugitive from justice in his own country. Su-

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dan has a clear obligation, imposed by the UN Security Council, to arrest and surrender Mr. Bashir to the ICC.”

The March 4 order contains two legal twists. It is the first warrant of arrest ever issued for a sitting head of state by the ICC, whose charter (the Rome Statute) disallows the head-of-state defense. This same principle has been applied elsewhere. Slobodan Milosevic was haled before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Charles Taylor of Liberia is currently on the dock before the Special Court in Sierra Leone. Former Chad President Hissène Habré will soon be prosecuted in Senegal for crimes committed while he was in office.

Filipinos are more familiar with Gen. Augusto Pinochet, former dictator of Chile, who crowned himself with lifetime immunity from prosecution before he stepped down from power. He was charged with the deaths of Spanish citizens during his ruthless regime, but the Spanish prosecutor (under the principle of “universal criminal jurisdiction”) was stumped on how he could arrest him—until the aging Pinochet checked into a hospital in England, which has an extradition treaty with Spain. Suddenly his immunity went poof. And the Chilean government itself later revoked his immunity.

The second legal twist is that al-Bashir's government has in fact stayed out of the Rome Statute. In other words, they didn't submit to the jurisdiction of the ICC, thinking this would provide them legal cover. Sudan's ambassador to the United States declared, “For us, the ICC does not exist!”

Well, that non-existent court has just ordered the arrest of an incumbent president. One, the power to file complaints with the ICC is given to states that have signed the ICC charter and to the ICC prosecutor

acting on his own (*motu proprio*). But there is a third mode wherein the UN Security Council can refer a case to the ICC. Two, the Security Council in its referral cited Sudan as a “threat to international peace and security”—thus invoking what is referred to in its Chapter VII as powers to take enforcement action and bind all UN member-states. All UN members, including Sudan and the Philippines, have signed the UN Charter which contains an “override” clause that says that their Charter obligations trump any other treaty or law. Thus the ICC warrant asked the Sudanese government to deliver its own president to the ICC's arresting officers, and called on all UN member states to cooperate in his “arrest and surrender.”

This creative reading combines the ICC's power under the Rome Statute and the UN Security Council's power under its Charter, and the result is this legal milestone.

We Filipinos may sometimes think that these legal developments are too distant and therefore irrelevant. Remember that our own martial law human rights victims won their case in Honolulu under an obscure US statute (“Alien Tort Claims Act of 1789”) which was reinterpreted in 1980 in the leading case *Filartiga v. Peña-Irala* involving Paraguayans. And if Filipinos think that the al-Bashir arrest warrant is only a Hague/Africa concern, note that already Asian human rights activists are gearing up to run after the Burmese generals using the anti-al-Bashir maneuver. The long arm of international justice is getting uncomfortably close to the Philippines.

This should sober “those [Filipino leaders] who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent.” The governmental mafiosi may think they can get away with kidnapping and extrajudicial killings, but their escape routes are narrowing and choking with each passing year. President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and her cohorts have stubbornly refused to send the Rome Statute for ratification by the Senate, thinking perhaps, like Pinochet and Milosevic before them, that they can find sanctuary in the homeland they have ravaged. Get this: You can run but you can't hide. (*Inquirer.net*)

# Poems on a train

MANY moons ago, in Gilda Cordero-Fernando's writing shed, someone had the bright idea of rescuing Philippine culture from the academic ivory tower or the glitzy galas at the Cultural Center of the Philippines and return it to ordinary people where it also belongs. Culture with a capital “C” had become so distant that one of Hitler's henchmen was quoted as saying, “Whenever I hear the word



LOOKING BACK

Ambeth Ocampo

‘culture’ I reach for my gun.” Gilda had made Philippine history and culture engaging through her wonderfully over-designed books. (Today, books of the same type, size, or look are known as “coffee-table books” because that is where Gilda wanted them to be initially.) She wanted her books to be browsed and enjoyed rather than lined up, unopened, on a library shelf high enough to be out of the reach of children or the curious. Gilda had written and published books. She had conceptualized an anti-fashion fashion show, and even produced a play on the *aswang*. Someone suggested she take on television or the movies (the Internet was not yet as popular then as it is today) so scripts were drafted, and the late Ishmael Bernal was tempted with lunch and good company to provide inputs.

Being the youngest in the group, I was the first asked to read some lines from the script. I had not completed my second sentence when Bernal

snapped: “You should stick to writing. With a monotone like that, you have no future in the movies or television.”

Although I failed that audition with a future National Artist for Film, I have since appeared in two X-rated films that didn't require dramatic reading. So when the Spanish cultural center in Manila, the Instituto Cervantes, asked me to read a poem on a train of the overhead Metro Rail Transit (MRT) to launch its *Berso sa Metro* [Verse on the Metro] campaign, I readily accepted because they didn't know what they were asking for.

Instituto Cervantes sent a set of poems that were to be reproduced in flyers that MRT passengers could take home. Other poems were to be posted inside and outside the trains providing the bored passengers a wonderful way to pass the time. The roster was impressive: Lope de Vega, San Juan de la Cruz, Luis Cernuda, Pedro Calderon de la Barca to represent Spanish poets; there are Latin American poets too like Pablo Neruda and Cesar Vallejo; but most important, there were Filipino poets in Spanish: Fernando Ma. Guerrero, Jose Rizal, Claro M. Recto, Jose Palma and Jesus Balmori.

I first chose a short poem by the Chilean poet Gonzalo Rojas entitled *Pericoloso* that reads:

*Qué rápido la calle vista de golpe,  
los espejos de los autos multiplicados por el sol, qué sucio*

*el aire:  
¿y esto  
era el Mundo?*

This is so apt for the MRT because it describes the scenery we endure on the EDSA highway every day. There is no comment on the pink urinals here but the feeling is universal. The Filipino translation reads:

*Sa isang sulyap, kay tulin ng lansangan, ang mga salamin ng mga sasakyan?  
pinararami ng araw, kayrumi ng hangin:  
at ito  
na ba ang mundo?*

My next choice was a funny poem by the Filipino poet Jesus Balmori (1886-1948), entitled *Señorita provinciana*, that talks of love:

*Tu lectura es Abelardo y Eloisa  
tu perfume favorito, el de azahares,  
y nimbada de ilusorias maravillas,  
en la iglesia, cuando acudes a misa,  
en lugar de ver a Dios en los altares,  
a tu lado ves un novio de rodillas.  
In Filipino:  
Ang binabasa mo'y Abelardo at Eloisa,  
paboritong pabango'y sa asahar gawa,  
at balot ng kislap ng madayang kabalaghan;  
sa simbahan, habang nakikinig ng misa,  
imbes na Diyos sa altar ang nakikita,  
katabing nobyong nakaluhod ay siyang minamadan.*

In the end I decided to read only one poem, the most beautiful in the series by Lope de Vega whose words and message seem so modern and current even if the poem was written over four centuries ago:

*Desmayarse, atreverse, estar furioso,  
Aspero, tierno, liberal, esquivo,  
Alentado, mortal, difunto, vivo,  
Leal, traidor, cobarde y animoso;  
no hallar fuera del bien centro y reposo,  
mostrarse alegre, triste, humilde, altivo,  
enojado, valiente, fugitivo,  
satisfecho, ofendido, receloso;  
huir el rostro al claro desengaño,  
beber veneno por licor suave,  
olvidar el provecho, amar el daño;  
creer que un cielo en un infierno cabe,  
dar la vida y el alma a un desengaño:  
esto es amor: quien lo probó lo sabe.  
Translated into Filipino:  
Nanghihina, mapangahas, nanggagalaiti,  
bastos, malaming, mapagbigay, mailap,  
matatag ang loob, mortal, patay, buhay,  
matapat, traydor, duwag at masigla;  
Nabalalisa sa gitna ng kapayapaan,  
mukhang masaya, malungkot, mapagpakumbaba, mapagmataas,  
nagalait, matapang, umiiwas  
kuntento, nasasaktan, mapaghinala;  
bulag sa katotohanan,  
ang lason sa kanya'y matamis na alak,  
'Di pansin ang kasaganahan, natutuwa kapag nasasaktan;  
Nasa impiyerno na'y para pa ring nasa langit,  
iaalay ang kaluluwa't buhay kahit nilililang:  
iyan ang pag-ibig: sinumang nakaranas, iya'y alam.*

MRT stands to lose significant income by putting these poems up instead of cell phone and shampoo ads, but then sometimes we shouldn't think of money but of things that elevate us. (*Inquirer.net*)