

2 new Filipino musicals pay tribute to moms

by RYAN CAYBYAB
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I RECENTLY HAD the privilege of watching two new musicals by women staged in different parts of the country: *Ima* in Pampanga and *Ay, Quile* in Davao. Both were musical tributes to mothers.

Ima (mother, in the Pampango dialect) celebrates the *Kapampangan* mother. *Ay, Quile*, the Mindanao musical, is a biography and a daughter's passionate tribute to her mom. I was moved by both productions, and I am excited that there are new currents in the cultural scene that deserve attention.

Parallelisms could be drawn from the two productions: What stands out clearly is how deeply we Filipinos regard our mothers. Both period musicals draw a picture of the quintessential Pinoy mother: A loving, caring, hardworking albeit occasionally overbearing matriarch who runs the family and its household, physically and emotionally. She causes emotional breakdowns, but she's also the loving core that binds us all.

Grand matriarch

Ima essays the lives of mothers from different generations. Set in the 1960s, the musical revolves around the upcoming 80th birthday of grand matriarch, *Donya* Tibang. Her daughter, Miding, who chooses to stay with her despite marriage, secretly prepares a grandiose party for her, and everyone's excited about the town's event of the year. After confrontations between mother and daughter take place, all ends well, and the musical closes with a spectacular gathering of guests.

Ima takes us on a familiar journey, in which the monotony of life is suddenly broken by hilarity, friendship and love. *Kapampangan* folk songs, as well as original compositions like *O Ima, O Anak (Oh Mother, Oh Daughter)* by Recy Pineda, *Utus Keni! Utus Keta! (Do This! Do That!)* by Andy Alviz, and *Masayang Kebaitan (Happy Birthday)* by Alviz and Pineda are interwoven for musical color.

Rambunctious women

If Alviz's name rings a bell, it's because he's worked with Cameron Mackintosh. He founded the

indigenous theater group, *ArtiSta.Rita*, that spearheads a cultural revolution in that area. Behind him is a rambunctious group of about 27 highly motivated women who are all past 50, and are successful executives, entrepreneurs, businesswomen and professionals. They're known collectively as *Teatru Ima* at *Arti*—or *MaArti*, as they are now known. They produced, sang, acted and danced, and they had spunk and pizzazz. They wore glamour as if it were second skin to them.

It was such a fun musical to watch, but it must have been a nightmare for the director to put together those strong-willed women on one stage. Happily, they pulled it off, and it didn't matter if the script was in the local dialect, because the story was easy to follow.

It was Marsha Nepomuceno, a good friend of my wife, Emmy, who brought us to Angeles to watch the performance. It was well worth the trip.

From composer Fe Ayala (known for her song, *Miss Kita Kung Christmas*) came the invitation to fly to Davao and watch *Ay, Quile*.

Quile is a real person by the name of Cresencia Fernandez Rey, born in 1892 in Cuyo, Palawan. The production traces her touching journey. Widowed thrice, her story puts the predictable storylines of soap operas to shame. Hers runs like an exciting epic, with plots and subplots that include sunken ships, the Bataan Death March, and colorful marriages.

Interspersed with fun production numbers and scenes that are loving and tenderly staged, *Ay, Quile* is an uplifting musical that pays tribute to a woman whose spirit is reflected in the lives of her children, and her children's children.

Nowhere is this observation more evident than with the composer, who is *Quile's* only daughter with her third husband, Capt. Eriberto Misa. Fe, the production's author, lyricist and composer (in collaboration with Hermie Uy and Arnel Mardouio), took after her mother, *Quile*, a strong-willed woman who's full of life and love.

Power singers

Produced by the Davao performance troupe, *Mebuyan*, *Ay, Quile* was ably directed by Nestor Horfilla. Cast includes power singers like Bayang Barrios in the title role and Chad Borja, who played *Quile's* second husband, Jose Cauwenbergh, as well as Verni Gonzalez, Angel Balbin, Rochelle Venuti, George Walter Misa and Jameelon Rivera.

Both productions were staged with meticulous care and attention to detail—from the costumes and sets to the sound and lights. Choreography was sparkling and well-executed.

After a little more technical polish for *Ima* and some trimming of *Ay, Quile*, we'll have two new productions worthy of being staged anywhere in the country—or, for that matter, the world. Congratulations to *MaArti* and *Mafe Ayala* for enriching our lives with new musicals about the Filipino mother. ■

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