

# Stereotyping, Stylization, and Spectacle in the Comedia Performance

Adelaida A. Figueras-Lucero

Department of English and Comparative Literature, University of the Philippines, Quezon City, Philippines

## ABSTRACT

The central and spectacular event of the annual town fiesta was the comedia. Both the elite and the barrio folks trooped to the town plaza for the special event of two-weeks, mesmerizing everyone with the colorful costumes, exciting marches and fights, and the glamorous faces of the mestiza and mestizo beauties of the municipality. The new technologies and gadgets have taken over the entertainment of old, however. Perhaps the producers and audience have tired of the predictable conflicts between the Christians and Muslims, and the equally predictable ending -- the victory of the Christians, with a romantic wedding of the converted Muslim prince or princess and the Christian hero or heroine. Or perhaps the anachronistic costumes and stylized movements and actions had become less attractive than the more realistic scenes on movie, television screens or ipads.

The cultural show may be revitalized, however. Using well-written plots close to the day's socio-political issues, and using native but very elegant clothing materials and designs, as well as patronizing our own martial arts, dances, and cultural practices may make a retooled comedia patriotic, relevant, and even educational.

**KEYWORDS:** *comedia, stereotyping, stylization, arnis*

Despite its relegation to the post-colonial margins, despite its unappreciated cultural value in a commodified setting, despite its seeming anachronism in a technology-driven twenty-first century, revisiting, re-constructing, re-studying, and reviving the comedia may unravel its potentials for cultural empowerment, its rich interrelations with our history, its multifaceted socio-political and cultural linkages with our diverse regional groups and their life ways.

The stereotype characters, stereotype plots, and stereotype stages and props may look superficial and unchallenging today. In the era without radios, television sets, movies, home theaters, MP3s and ipods, however, the community fiesta was the big happening. And the comedia was at the heart of the celebration.

The comedia's Christian and Muslim kings, queens, princes, princesses, dukes, ambassadors, warriors, and the whole entourage may have played predictable roles and clear cut missions, but the actors' fine looks, their regal bearing, their charming acting, their romantic entanglements provided the captive minds' entertainment, if not escape mechanisms. For the actors and actresses were chosen from the good-looking and educated mestizo/mestizas of the town's elite, or children of dons and donas, with superstar status or politico-

appeal, in the town. They provided close encounters with glamour and sophisticates. Hence, for farmhands or barrio folk, the experience was the fans' fulfillment in a first hand encounter with the local equivalents of Armi Kusela and Elizabeth Taylor, or Marlon Brando and Richard Burton; the scenes played out before them their role models' gestures and walking, fighting stances. For the viewing ladies and matrons' imagining themselves in the shoes of the ladies of gentility, their finery, as well as their love affairs, parallels the social pastime of opera-going European ladies, or of theatre- cum fashion- conscious bourgeoisie, and reinforces their elitist if superficial mores and preoccupations, or a false sense of their social station. For the housemaids and fishwives, the show enacts their dreams, or their wild imaginations where their pock-marked faces are as flawless and beautiful as the princesses' and where they are dressed in the silk finery and decked in jewelry they will never have; where they dance or flirt with conjured dukes and princes with the elegance they can hardly acquire; flutter their eyelashes and fans in the delicate art of coquetry or intrigues that provide refreshing distraction from the drudgery of kitchen chores or laundry work.

The immediacy of effect created by the performers right before the viewers' eyes were once-a year experiences that

**How to cite this paper:** Adelaida A. Figueras-Lucero "Stereotyping, Stylization, and Spectacle in the Comedia Performance"

Published in International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (ijtsrd), ISSN: 2456-6470, Volume-4 | Issue-1, December 2019, pp.675-677, URL: [www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd29611.pdf](http://www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd29611.pdf)



Copyright © 2019 by author(s) and International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development Journal. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>)



Paper delivered at the First International Conference on the Comedia in February 2008, at the National Engineering Center Auditorium.

transported them to what would have been Camelot, tinsel world, or Hollywood. The conventional plots and subplots did have predictable endings but the forbidden love between an undaunted Moor prince (or princess) and an equally undaunted Christian princess (or prince), the dangers and the challenges entailed amidst the warring religious factions, the subterfuges, and daring ploys must have enchanted all. [One proof of fascination lies in comedia-playing of their own versions by children. In fact, I remember, as a child, my cousins and I played princes and princess roles in simplified versions of the story plots, in our backyard].

Similarly fascinating were the stylized modes of marching, of speaking (*diccio*) and acting, and of fighting central to the performance of the comedia. The audience seemed ever captivated by the marches (*marcha*) which marked each court scene --- the slow, measured march, the elegant twirling of swords and spears, and the regal mien and bearing of the Christian court's noble characters and warriors, affirming the solemn and the noble [demonstration]; and in contrast, the jocular and sprightly hop, skip, and dance steps in the Moslem arena, reflecting its gaiety and dynamism [demonstration]. Equally interesting were the action and dialog in patterns set for the narrative, the expository, or the dare-to-fight scenes, framed by movements forward and backward (in order to hear the prompter behind the curtain)[demonstration]. It was the fighting scenes (*batalla*) demonstrating the dancing-fighting prowess of warriors and princes, however, that awed everyone; it was the fight between a princess and a prince, or a princess(es) against another princess(es), with their bouffant skirts swaying with every move, that brought the house down[demonstration]. Such crowd-drawing potential then could not have been lost upon the authorities in dire need of media for government (or Church) propaganda or of distracting "circuses" for people wearied by socio-political problems. To be fair-skinned and *guapa/guapo* was alluring enough, but to be daring and skilled in fight meant superstar status, particularly for children echoing their lines and imitating their fights, or for community chroniclers establishing local celebrities' records.

Aside from the action-dance-packed fighting, the audience was regaled by these spectacular elements in the comedia: colorful, stone-studded European silk gowns and princely regalia; extraordinary feats, even miracles; unusual characters including angels; unexpected stage events, like prancing white horses and stage effects, like fireworks; and the reverberating musical accompaniments and sound effects for the comedia (especially the *marcha* and *batalla*) provided by the town's band or orchestra. These equivalents of today's audio-visual effects must have immensely entertained the general public and assaulted their imaginations to make them stay on for more spectacle for hours. These were all part of the spectacle, the show of the year that became the talk of the masses the rest of the year.

(There were specific movements and rules to be followed. While one warrior attacked, the other defended of course, unless directed otherwise. Warriors take turns attacking each other. The basic attacker choreography sequence involved a few sword slashes and ended with a dagger thrust. This could be varied, of course, to more aggressive slashes and thrusts, and the defender could find himself bending and jumping to avoid the hits. All of these are done

in time with the music. It is the music that dictates the rhythm of the battle.

And on we go to the show's "spectacular" quality. Songs and dances abound, just like another traditional Filipino play, the *sarswela*. The costumes glittered onstage, and the characters were larger-than-life. These costumes are exaggeratedly extravagant, certainly more than those found in modern Filipino plays. Every character had a headdress, just like the characters in the *moro-moro*, and was bedecked with accessories. The stage was placed outdoors, under the moon and the stars, just like it was in colonial times. Nature, in all its glory, had an important role to play and never disappointed. (The sky was full of stars and not a single drop of rain fell during the entire nightly run!) Through the incorporation of these elements, Entablado did its best to recreate the experience of Filipinos who watched the *moro-moros* or the *sarswelas* years and years ago.)

The comedia may have afforded the farmers, fisher folk, weavers, and housemaids, some leisure time, away from harsh work and realities, to enjoy the spectacle, the romances and heroic exploits, to fantasize other worlds, other lifestyles; the bourgeoisie or elite, the vicarious experience of savoring the privileged status of their counterparts on stage which underscored and reinforced, if not justified their own *don* and *dona* behavior. Yet, for a few hours or even a few days' watching too, the rich and poor audience alike imbibed the colonial propaganda; they learned the values foregrounded; consciously or unconsciously, passively or unquestioningly, they internalized the feudalistic system, with the privileged status of the "noble" classes, and the religious polarities valorizing the Christians. For these were all givens, not questioned, but taken for granted, even accepted as part of the socio-political world. The nobles, the mestizos, the good-looking, the educated lay in the first rung of the hierarchical setup. They ruled the rest of society...for they thought they knew and did what was allegedly best for the people. The soldiers, the dukes, the ladies-in -waiting were epitomes of loyal followers. Any schemer against the ruling family was seen deserving capital punishment. The captivating show really instilled these tenets in their subconscious.

Moreover, love [no less than that of the hero princes or of the heroine princess] was so romanticized that the Muslim lover sacrifices his/her religion and kingdom for a Christian prince or princess; or a Christian prince or princess will surmount all obstacles to win the love of the Moslem prince/ss and ensure her/his conversion to the Christian religion. The propaganda of the Catholic Church was like a mantra ever-repeated in the performances, worming itself in the audience hearts and minds: The Christian fighters were supreme, and the religion was indomitable; hence, the best fighter prince loses to the Christian; the most fastidious and loyal Muslim leader, admired by all in his/her kingdom sees the need for conversion, accepts the supremacy of the Christian faith, just as he/she sees a collaboration of the two kingdoms, if not a merging thru a royal marriage, solves conflicts and strengthens the politically merged states. Simplistic, unrealistic, and antagonistic [to the Muslims specially].

One can imagine the huge impact of this motif, this *topoi*, this mantra on the various sectors involved - the actors, the plot writers, the directors, the audience, the political leaders, the

church officials, and even the Muslims. In the twenty-first century, however, where the comedia has become passé to most communities, yet where religious conflicts entwined with politics continue to fester in the South, this comedia has no place. Were it to flourish in this day and age in some predominantly Christian areas, it would incense the majority, it would incite numerous nationalist groups to denounce its anti-Muslim propaganda, its divisive impact, its anti-democratic stance. It would certainly engender protests right and left.

Considering how the old comedia's stereotyped narratives and characters, how the bourgeois hunks and beauties as actors fed the people's hunger for entertainment; how the stylized marches, dialog, yet exciting fighting scenes had such drawing power; and how the spectacular facets of the day and night performance imbued the comedia performance with staying power, can these stereotyping, stylization, and spectacle not be aptly updated and upgraded for the twenty-first century audience and with twenty-first century technology in order to create the new comedia? Can the comedia be revisioned and retooled in such a way that it would address today's major problems, that it would reclaim lost ground, that it would reach out, even inspire various regional groups and performing troupes towards empowerment?

The central features of the comedia – the color, the spectacle, the stereotype plot and theme -- can be the retooling crux. Instead of the predictable, now humdrum stereotype plot; instead of foreign and strange characters in unknown and distant lands; instead of the belabored quarrels between Christians and Muslims; instead of simplistic stories of Christian leaders' triumphs over Muslims; new narratives, diverging from the Christian-Muslim conflict, emphasizing laudable facets of our history, foregrounding beautiful relations among different ethnic groups, valorizing time-tested cultural values, and the like, can revitalize the dying genre to dynamic relevance.

For instance, **figuratively**, the Ilocano Lam-angs and Ines Kannyans of later days can collaborate with the Cordillerans to produce tapestries of the famous durable abel with the equally well-known ikat designs, or bodongs of peaceful co-existence. Or the Agyu heroes of Bukidnon can test or instill their leadership criteria among migrant groups. The new generation can create new music, dance, clothes, from native materials, emphasizing and preferring the beauty and quality of our own to those of the foreign. Or else, in complete reverse of the stereotype, but in consonance with very realistic situations, depict the Maranao princess successfully enticing the beloved Christian professor to don the malong and putong to become the ruling-partner as sultan. Or, like Senator Santanina Rasul and her daughter, advance the cause of marginalized ethnic women, especially the illiterate and poor. The plots, the characters, the concerns, the situations, the possibilities are immense and promising... a far cry from the bigotry and insensitivity, of the traditional comedia.

Instead of the stereotype fights and marches, well-trained actors can engage in arnis duels<sup>1</sup>, demonstrate prowess in

<sup>1</sup> The home-grown martial arts may be patronized – the arnis. Instead of the comedia's wooden spears and swords,

Pacquiao-like boxing, skill in nose-flute, kulintang or agong playing, grace in cherished tinikling or other native dance steps. Instead of the European elegance in satin or silk, rhinestoned and hooped gowns and the equally scintillating regalia of the males, let the hablon, the jusi, the pina, the sinuksok design, the barong and the terno underscore the delicate beauty of our own shine on stage.

Add to these the color and authentic exoticism of the accessories, musical implements, and cultural practices of the regional groups, dramatized by the local "star material" in modern stages, complemented by the state of the art theatre technology, and the new comedia emerges -- relevant, vibrant, challenging, even inspiring.

Hence, the comedia revisioned and retooled, can be transformed from the vehicle for colonization that it was to a tool for decolonization, from an escape mechanism and audio-visual propaganda-entertainment to relevant multi-media "infotainment," from the divisive Christian propaganda of old to a unifying, democratizing educative theater platform, if not a showcase of the regions' rich cultural heritage.

the *arnis* sticks were essential. The hero's side and the enemy's side strike several different "poses" using the *arnis* as they face each other at the start of the *batalya*. Each side would march circularly, building up the intimidation along with the music. Then each warrior had to target his opponent, before breaking up into individual battles.

Each warrior had two *arnis* sticks: the longer was used as a sword, the shorter was used as a dagger. Even with *arnis* sticks, one had to be careful not to hit the body of one's opponent even when acting as if the blow is dealt with full force. Usually, warriors in *moro-moros* use steel swords, which are heavier than the *arnis* sticks. We got to watch a clip of the usual *batalya* scene, and the professionals' handling of their weapons was amazing.