

TWO WOMEN AS SPECTERS OF HISTORY

LAKAMBINI and **INDIGO CHILD** by **RODY VERA**

[Rody] Vera cultivated the serendipitous vision of regarding Gregoria de Jesus, widow of the first would-have-been President Andres Bonifacio, as the body on whom the betrayals and shortcomings of the foreign invader, local elite, and well-intentioned revolutionary would be inscribed. With the return to popularity of the surviving members of Marcos's family, premised on the wager that the present generation would be ignorant or dismissive of the strongman's monstrosities, Vera responded to an invitation to provide a play that turned on the traumatic experience of a left-revolutionary activist, the late-twentieth-century counterpart of de Jesus....



With the present volume, the earnest student of communication should be sufficiently motivated to read through the material as written (and answered, in the interview) by Vera and arranged by the publisher. Also indispensable would be a viewing of *Indigo Child*, the soon-to-be-completed documentary on *Lakambini*, and (if our luck holds out) the feature-film version of *Lakambini* itself. A more casual reader could opt to zero in on *Indigo Child* first, especially if she would have seen the play and/or [Ellen] Ongkeko-Marfil's filmization. Since none of the entries in this volume . . . is a closed text, such a casual reader would be left with a clutch of unanswered questions. I would imagine that that would motivate [the reader] to proceed to the interview with Vera; but inasmuch as the said interview only provides tantalizing references to the *Lakambini* script, then our casual reader would wind up reading everything as well, even in an alternate order.

"Theater, Film, & Everything in Between"
by Joel David

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FELISA: Ikaw ang puputol ng kadena ng paulit-ulit na kasawian...



VERA & ONGKEKO-MARFIL

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Edited, with production notes & interview by **ELLEN ONGKEKO-MARFIL**

With an introduction by **JOEL DAVID**



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CONTENTS

vii	Foreword	LIZA C. MAGTOTO
ix	Preface	ELLEN ONGKEKO-MARFIL
xiii	Theater, Film, & Everything in between: An Introduction to <i>Two Women as Specters of History</i>	JOEL DAVID
001	Interview with Rody Vera	ELLEN ONGKEKO-MARFIL
<hr/>		
027	Lakambini	RODY VERA
127	Production Notes	ELLEN ONGKEKO-MARFIL
145	Indigo Child	RODY VERA
163	Production Notes	ELLEN ONGKEKO-MARFIL
<hr/>		
177	Biographies	

THEATER, FILM, & EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

An Introduction to Two Women as Specters of History

JOEL DAVID

The present volume marks one of the few times that a celebrated collaboration between a Philippine film director and her or his regular scriptwriter has been commemorated in book form. A few examples—Lamberto V. Avellana and Rolf Bayer, Gerardo de Leon and either Pierre L. Salas or Jose Flores Sibal, Ishmael Bernal and Jorge Arago, Lino Brocka and Jose F. Lacaba, the Peque Gallaga/Lore Reyes team and Uro Q. de la Cruz, Mario O'Hara and Frank Rivera, Maryo J. de los Reyes and Jake Tordesillas—never even had a book publication attesting to their productivity; all the more tragic when we consider that of the several pairs, only Lacaba, Gallaga/Reyes, and Rivera (none of the partnerships, in fact) still remain with us.

The pair of scripts comprising *Lakambini* and *Indigo Child* can count as their predecessor, a few books by Doy del Mundo (on Mike de Leon's films) and Ricardo Lee (on Marilou Diaz-Abaya's). The similarities are highly instructive, starting with these teams' progressive commitment, and motivate us to look forward to more publications on, say, the films made by the earlier listed collaborators, as well as contemporary ones such as *Brillante Mendoza* and *Armando Lao*, or by Erik Matti and Michiko Yamamoto, or even, for throwback's sake, by Jeffrey Jeturian and Lao.

No other Filipino director-writer collaboration has been as triumphant as Diaz-Abaya and Lee's, and the director's remarkable credit naming herself, Lee, and their producer Jesse Ejercito as co-authors of their most celebrated project, *Moral*, attested to their attainment. Like Lee and Diaz-Abaya during that period, Rody Vera and Ellen

Ongkeko-Marfil may be both described as relative newcomers in their professions, having started their film-auteur careers only since the turn of the millennium. An alumna of the Philippine Educational Theater Association's Broadcast & Film Inc. who explored mainstream cinema even during her early years in theater, Ongkeko-Marfil facilitated the casting of Vera in one of her formative film projects—Mike de Leon's *Sister Stella L.* in 1984; it was for the former project that Vera performed "Manggagawa," his signature song in the anti-dictatorship movement's street-theater presentations. In Ongkeko-Marfil's inevitable turn to film producing and directing, she would solicit Vera's help, providing him with some of his early scriptwriting breaks.

The difference between the two partnerships is even more striking. Where Diaz-Abaya and Lee spanned the extremes that marked their moment in Philippine society (rural and urban, working-class and privileged, old and young, female and male, queer and cis, and so on), Vera and Ongkeko-Marfil have had such convergent experiences that the differences between them nearly matter little. As a result, where Diaz-Abaya and Lee's films exhibit the social tensions experienced firsthand by their collaborators, Ongkeko-Marfil and Vera's projects convey a relaxed sense of these conflicts already having been resolved before the artists proceeded to tackle them. (Personal disclosure: all four individuals have been good friends of mine.)

But the current two-in-one offering also circumscribes the history of printed screenplays in the Philippines: the very first one (published in 1981 by a group I was part of) was a pair of Lee's scripts with two different directors—Diaz-Abaya's *Brutal* and Laurice Guillen's *Salome*. More novel examples come from Clodualdo del Mundo Jr., who not only published three scripts in one book (two of them co-written with other writers, one unproduced, plus his celebrated adaptation of Edgardo Reyes's 1967 novel *Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag*, renamed *Maynila*); he also later came up with two of his scripts for Mike de Leon—one for the unfinished film *Rizal*, and the other for the finished Rizal project, *Bayaning 3rd World*. Even more titles were crammed in Nick Deocampo's *Beyond the Mainstream*, although these were in fact the scripts of his short films.

Once the publication of screenplays in the Philippines began with *Brutal/Salome*, the activity became more widespread than the proliferation of book titles would suggest. Libraries and private collectors began to archive shooting scripts, including directors' handwritten notes; entertainment and literary magazines began to serialize screenplays of major releases, culminating in the inclusion

of the complete and uncensored text (with English translation) of Ishmael Bernal's *Manila by Night* in the literary section of the humanities journal *Kritika Kultura*. But a final distinction marks the current volume as well: by some strict technical definitions, these are scripts of not-films—in the sense that *Lakambini* has not been (so far, as of this moment) completed, and that *Indigo Child* was primarily a stage presentation, and the existing documentation, in being completely faithful to the terms of the play, brings home this point as well. Both experienced collaborations with stage and film directors, but both are even more fully the output of their author, Rody Vera.

POLITICS OF GENDER AND NATION

Since his emergence as a theater talent in the late 1970s, as performer and playwright, Vera has been expanding his range of skills beyond the medium and format where he had originally trained. This was in line with the Philippine Educational Theater Association's goal of reaching out to the Philippine audience in whatever media might be most effective in communicating with them. Right from the beginning, he began not just writing original material but also translating foreign-language plays into Filipino. Not long after, he cofounded Patatag (named after an indigenous musical instrument), the most highly-regarded among the progressive choral groups in the country, with several well-received CDs and well-remembered concerts to their name.

His training in performance and singing earned him not just solo numbers in the Patatag repertoire but also his first film role, as Roger, an ill-fated labor activist in Mike de Leon's *Sister Stella L.* (1984). A few years later, after the downfall of the Marcos dictatorship, he modified his earlier feature persona and this time played a student activist in Lino Brocka's *Orapronobis* (1989). When film itself collapsed, in a manner of speaking, and was replaced by digital technology, he "played" himself, as a PETA member recalling Brocka, the company's former executive director who had a turbulent relationship with its members. The film, Sigfreid Barros-Sanchez's *Ang Anak ni Brocka* (2005), was a mockumentary premised on the possibility that the late director left behind an illegitimate child.

In a sense, these performative highlights, recorded on celluloid and video, betokened Vera's restless reversals and shifts in media practice. The cliché about anyone aspiring to cover everything and triumphing in nothing is twice inapplicable in this case: Vera focused on a limited number of areas (all admittedly challenging), and devoted himself to an extreme, if not harsh, extent. These realities became evident during the year-long Golden Anniversary presentations of PETA in 2017. During

the talent-packed tribute *Singkuwenta*, the star-is-born revelation, recounted in every single press coverage of the event, was that of Vera as a singer. With the death of Soxie Topacio not long afterward, the organization lost not just one of its best and most well-loved resident talents but also the director of the planned restaging of Alan Glinoga's translation of Bertolt Brecht's *Leben des Galilei*.

First staged in 1981, *Ang Buhay ni Galileo* was directed by German National Theatre's Fritz Bennewitz, who had died in 1995. Inasmuch as Vera had agreed to be Topacio's dramaturge, and had in fact translated another play, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, for Bennewitz, the task of completing Topacio's would-have-been final project fell into his hands. The process led to one of Vera's rare periods of disappearance from all other social commitments and suspension of professional tasks, except for the rehearsals of the play—which turned out, unsurprisingly, a resounding success worthy of Vera's predecessors.

What makes the achievement remarkable is the way it illuminates Vera's concerns over how strongly the past resonates with the present. Events such as the persecution of Galileo, the colonial occupations of the Philippines (with more claimants—Spain, England, the United States, Japan, possibly China—than any other Southeast Asian nation), the imposition of military dictatorship, the restoration of oligarchic rule: all these and more have the potential of driving any progressive observer to a nihilistic dead-end, paralyzed by frustration upon frustration, ever since the possibility of a socialist utopia gave up the ghost (so to speak) with the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the end of the Cold War.

Vera's output is taking stock of these historical upheavals in terms of their profound implications for progressive movements in less-developed situations, that of the Philippines included. The idea of Communism as a system that has returned to its originally spectral status (per Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's *The Communist Manifesto*) is ascribed to deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida. No longer is the Orthodox-Marxist system a viable option for the historical present, but Marx's call to social critique for the purpose of bettering the conditions of society's Others will haunt capitalism's inexorable spread and dominance. Way before his first solo credit as scriptwriter, in Loy Arcenas's *Niño* (2011), Vera had sought to carve a niche as a purveyor of material that may be regarded as attentive to political matters, whether of the nation, province, gender, or family. His record has been remarkable, in terms of his association with directors' personal-best films: Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil's *Boses* (2008), Lav Diaz's *Norte, Hangganan*

ng *Kasaysayan* (2013), Jun Lana's *Die Beautiful* (2016). His commitment to social and historical analyses perseveres, via a follow-up to Chito Roño's *Badil* (2013), which he had written, as well as co-writing *Goyo: Ang Batang Heneral* (2018), the second installment of Jerrold Tarog's ambitious period epics that kicked off with the sleeper hit *Heneral Luna* (2015).

THE CALL TO REMEMBER

Born to a family whose siblings were anti-fascist activists and coming of age during the First Quarter Storm, whose battles were fought literally on their doorstep, near Malacañang Palace, Vera grew up steeped in the tradition of protest and resistance. The performative aspects of these protest actions were shaped by his early exposure to theater, not just in the usual classroom activities but more from the transgressive productions of the now-forgotten playwright-director Reijoo de la Cruz, starting with his SAMASKOM production of *Programang Putol-Putol* (Vera 104) at the Abelardo Hall Auditorium of the College of Music of the University of the Philippines.

Vera's description of his self-introduction to theater betokens the proverbial awakening to the world of artistic possibilities, a moment that has to be suspended in order for us to return to it and understand it more fully:

I was so taken by the play, I watched it a second time. That play stuck in my mind for quite a long time. I thought all plays were like that—structured in an “absurdist” style, cloaked in so many symbols and deceptive devices. My introduction to theater therefore was through this route, which led me to read up on so-called absurdist dramatists like Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Samuel Beckett, and I guess Edward Albee—all of whom I read in my second year in high school. These plays I read and kept only to myself. (Vera 104)

The account encapsulates the methodical process, possibly the only one available prior to the information age jump-started by the worldwide web, that a precocious early teen could devise in pursuit of a skill that stirred a passion that would only be quenched once it was mastered. I could track this much from Vera's account, largely because it was around this time that I also took to watching (also on my own, as a high-school loner) the Reijoo de la Cruz plays as well as the other presentations—mostly classical and Pinoy-rock concerts and an occasional film screening—at the Abelardo Hall Auditorium.

I resolved to focus on literature (mostly fiction, although I was aware that early that no one could thrive entirely in such an endeavor), and I drew up whatever canons were available so I could begin collecting and reading whatever were considered essential texts. I could not risk aggravating the horrific bullying I endured from a school gang and their hangers-on who were desperate to prove their worth (which amounted to nothing—something I sensed even then but also refused to voice, out of sheer terror) at the expense of intellectual delight and literary fluency. So whatever reasons Vera had for keeping his self-study to himself, I knew that, at best, these could have enhanced his well-being; and at worst, these could have entailed his own survival from any equivalent anti-intellectual backlash.

I also knew I could draw from certain factors in my lineage, like a grandmother plucked out of high school by early American-occupation administrators in order to teach English, a mother who translated letters from all over the country for the Office of the Philippine President, a father who set up the country's first non-mechanized silk-screen printing shop after training with the US Army. In Vera's case, the link was less visible yet more direct: his grandfather, Pedro T. Vera, set up Sampaguita Pictures, which became the most successful Philippine movie studio prior to the emergence of Regal Films; unfortunately, he perished during World War II, and per Rody Vera's account, his parents were not as interested in movie-going as he was.

The connection between Sampaguita and the soon-to-be dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos provided the motive for Vera's departure from hitching his star, so to speak, to the family movie outfit. Occasionally calling itself Vera-Perez Pictures, Sampaguita had screen-tested the then-single Imelda Romualdez, but lost her to Ferdinand after she took an out-of-town trip with her then-boyfriend. The Marcoses acknowledged Sampaguita's investment in their public image by commissioning it to produce hagiographical biopictures, acknowledged as providing the necessary margin for Ferdinand to win his presidential elections in 1965 and 1969.¹ During the Marcos regime, Marichu Vera-Perez, who took over after her father "Doc" Jose Roxas Perez

1 These films were: *Iginuhit ng Tadhana: The Ferdinand E. Marcos Story* (Drawn by Fate; 1965, dir. Conrado Conde, Jose de Villa, and Mar S. Torres); and *Pinagbuklod ng Langit* (Bonded by Heaven; 1969, dir. Eddie Garcia). In both films, Ferdinand was played by Luis Gonzales, Imelda by Gloria Romero, Ferdinand's mother by Rosa Mia, and Imee by Vilma Santos; in the first film, Ferdinand Jr. (also known as Bongbong) played himself—the first known appearance in a feature film of a member of the Marcos family.

passed away in 1975, became known as part of Imelda's "Blue Ladies" circle and took charge of several industry functions, including running the lucrative Film Fund Department of the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines.

THEATER AS DETOUR

PETA's and its members' identification with radical-left opposition to the Marcos dictatorship provided the motive for Vera to connect with like-minded individuals (including Ongkeko-Marfil) and search for materials that could enable them to respond to an urgent call to interrogate the failures and frustrations of a young nation, via the perspective of the sector that had always served as its objects of conquest as well as its hope for the future: the Filipino woman. Not only are Pinays the primary backbone propping up the national economy as the majority of Philippine overseas workers; since the failure of the country's last major masculinist project, Ferdinand Marcos's disastrous foray into authoritarianism, more women have taken charge of government and corporate administration in the Philippines than in any other Asia-Pacific country, as reflected in the World Economic Forum's annual Gender Gap Reports.

Yet (male-dominated) Philippine history has been nothing less than neglectful, if not abusive, toward the Filipina. Vera cultivated the serendipitous vision of regarding Gregoria de Jesus, widow of the first would-have-been President Andres Bonifacio, as the body on whom the betrayals and shortcomings of the foreign invader, local elite, and well-intentioned revolutionary would be inscribed. With the return to popularity of the surviving members of Marcos's family, premised on the wager that the present generation would be ignorant or dismissive of the strongman's monstrosities, Vera responded to an invitation to provide a play that turned on the traumatic experience of a left-revolutionary activist, the late-twentieth-century counterpart of de Jesus. The odyssey of these two projects toward media commemoration is narrated in the other sections of this collection.

What is unusual is how both projects wound up traversing the various formats that Vera worked in. *Lakambini* was initially filmed as a feature project by Ongkeko-Marfil, co-directing with Jeffrey Jeturian, until the realities of period-film production with mainstream stars caught up with the team; a still-untitled nonfiction account of the attempted making of the movie, intertwined with the several unresolved questions surrounding de Jesus (from revolutionary partner through severely traumatized widow to apparently eccentric recluse), is now on its way to completion. *Indigo Child*, on the other hand, was intended to be

a two-hander stage presentation, handled by veteran theater director José Estrella; obtaining permission from the Never Again: Voices of Martial Law theater festival, Ongkeko-Marfil had the play staged for the purpose of video documentation, but covered the set, performers, and voices in precise and inspired cinematic takes, judiciously interposing a few graphic effects but mostly allowing the actors and the stage to command the material.

Indigo Child is the rare Filipino film where the play is also, technically speaking, the film script; its predecessor is certainly no less prestigious—Lamberto V. Avellana’s 1965 adaptation of Nick Joaquin’s *Portrait of the Artist as Filipino*. Over half a century since, the play has been filmed again, this time by Loy Arcenas (whose debut and sophomore films Vera had co-scripted), with Joaquin’s narrative, originally presented as a musical, set to lyrics by Rolando Tinio and music by Ryan Cayabyab. Will we expect similar fates for *Indigo Child* and *Lakambini*? The answer, sadly, will depend on whether future generations will again need to be reminded that flirting with fascism leads to nothing but an abusive and tragic relationship.

Indigo Child—and the announced documentary on the making of *Lakambini*, once it has been finalized—serves as reminders for us not only to be alert to the dangers of anti-democratic and authoritarian options. Both will also be useful exemplars that Philippine cinema may be propped up by a mainstream center, emblemized by independent releases—and just as essentially enhanced by formats we tend to regard mistakenly as dispensable or extraneous: the documentary, the filmed drama, the TV program, the internet novelty upload, the video diary, the found footage (from chats or surveillace cameras), and so on. The death of film only proceeded from the virtual cessation of celluloid production; a medium that potentially exists everywhere can no longer be regarded as a distinct phenomenon. Yet just as journalism never managed to replace fictional narrativizing, films (as they’ve been known for the past century) continue to be made, exhibited, discussed, and commemorated in positive or negative terms.

APPROACHES

With the present volume, the earnest student of communication should be sufficiently motivated to read through the material as written (and answered, in the interview) by Vera and arranged by the publisher. Also indispensable would be a viewing of *Indigo Child*, the soon-to-be-completed documentary on *Lakambini*, and (if our luck holds out) the feature-film version of *Lakambini* itself. A more casual reader could opt to zero in on *Indigo Child* first, especially if she would have seen the play

and/or Ongkeko-Marfil's filmization. Since none of the entries in this volume, except perhaps for this introductory essay, is a closed text, such a casual reader would be left with a clutch of unanswered questions. I would imagine that that would motivate her to proceed to the interview with Vera, but inasmuch as the said interview only provides tantalizing references to the *Lakambini* script, then our casual reader would wind up reading everything as well, even in an alternate order.

Those who wish to look into Vera's artistry beyond this volume might be gladdened to learn that he has an early draft of a dream project that involves a literally spectral woman (a mythological monster) haunting key events in twentieth-century Philippine history. Regardless, more advanced students and faculty colleagues will want to position Vera (as well as several other talents, including Ongkeko-Marfil) in relation to PETA and the history of cultural activism that it spearheaded, especially in its engagement with the popular-culture audience. All the crossover artists associated with the group (many of them highly influential) would be another source for comparative evaluation, but one could also delve into the queer-feminist and critical-Marxist orientations of these two practitioners and how these perspectives informed their output. Finally, the still-unfolding political economy of their separate modes of practice would be of vital, possibly sensational, interest; but that should be up to these two individuals to disclose.

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BIOGRAPHIES

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ELLEN ONGKEKO-MARFIL is founder-president of Pelikulove Corp (at www.pelikulove.com.ph), a startup online multi-arts channel dedicated to building and empowering creative communities through training—starting with Rody Vera’s online playwriting course—and production services. A cum laude graduate of Broadcast Communication at UP Diliman, she started out at Philippine Educational Theater Association and its Broadcast and Film unit, moved on to mainstream film and television doing both creative and managerial work for entertainment and news and public affairs until she turned into independent filmmaking through Erasto Films. Some of her directorial works include: Documentaries *Is Your Gender an Issue?* and *Luha, Pawis at Tuwa: Kasaysayan ng mga Babaeng Maralita*