

Gintong Silahis

BEHN CERVANTES

“Barikada”

It was 1971. I was busy with the final rehearsals of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the sensational rock musical by the talented British duo Lloyd and Webber. It was presented in the top-of-the-line Meralco Theater and proved its biggest box office show for many years. Actually, it was one of two JCS productions, the other being staged at the Cultural Center of the Philippines. Since it had only been presented as a cantata in London, our production was the premiere staging of the trend-setting musical.

Naturally, the show had ample publicity. Marilen Martinez, our Mary Magdalene, was contracted by ABS-CBN executives for her own television show called *Marilen* after she sang in a noon-time show of the studio as part of the publicity campaign.

SDK founder Sixto Carlos Jr. had instructed Bebop Belcena to approach me to help out in the finance drive of the organization. So between performances, I made the rounds of executive suites with Bebop and several young volunteer-recruits usually from La Salle who owned cars for those fund-raising treks. Since this was the crest of the First Quarter Storm, it was relatively easy to get contributions from big business tycoons and conscience-stricken personalities. That we dared knock on their doors and were entertained during office hours with our long hair, beards and sandals was a sign of the times. There was general discontent with the Marcos regime and a palpable apprehension of

the political future since accusations were rife that wily Ferdinand would extend his term by any means, including declaring martial law, if need be. There was public denunciation of such ambitions and cries for his downfall were heard in daily and multiple demonstrations, now turning more virulent and violent.

I was approached to direct a production on the Diliman Commune called *Barikada*. I was to work closely with a young group of Philippine Science High alumni that included Tony Tujan, Mon Coronel and Mike Reyes, a.k.a. Lore Reyes. It was a script in progress since it altered as it developed with rehearsals and experimentation. Tos Lansang came up with *Ang Tao ang Mahalaga*, *Tigreng Papel*, and other original songs that soon were lustily rendered in rallies and demonstrations by the newly organized Gintong Silahis. For all intents and purposes, I was GS's Artistic Director and coach since the main performing group soon lived together in an HQ called Boni for daily exercises and our multiple performances in rallies and strikes around Greater Manila. It was the busiest theatre group I had ever worked with. Certainly, it was the most committed.

An open audition was held for the *Barikada* at the Asian Labor Education Center (ALEC). There was a huge turnout, including Superstar cast members Joey Alvir, Dodo Crisol, and Gigi Dueñas. Dodo is now a well-known operatic tenor while Gigi went on to appear as Marlon Brando's native bride in *Apocalypse Now*. Joey is a successful doctor in New York. Everything was coming up (red) roses, we thought.

However, a few days later, Marcos suspended the writ of habeas corpus, so come the next rehearsal, only Tony, Mon, Lore and a few courageous others were in the venue. Esteemed solons Tañada, Diokno, Salonga, Padilla and Ninoy lambasted the Marcos ploy in Senate while civil libertarians roundly condemned the writ suspension. The press was up in arms.

Despite the uncertainty of our fate, we continued with production plans and improved the script. I was turning it into a multi-media production for greater effect and because of the awesome logistical demands inherent in the event.

We slowly got most of the cast back with quality members like Susan Dava, Tos Lansang, Toks Trinidad, Lilian, Cecilio, George *Kulot* and George *Liit*, Mang Vic, Malu Salazar, Louie Reyes, Julie and many others. The cast

made up mostly of (drop-out) students, (unemployed) workers and urban poor eventually became the founding members of GS. Of course, I soon discovered who the full-timers were (the cadres, in other words) as well as the roles Boni Ilagan and a certain Cenon played in the over-all structure of Gintong Silahis.

I used the chorale technique and repetition of lines to minimize the need for expensive machines like microphones. I worked on an arena concept of performance and employed choreographed movement for songs, poems and lines. Peking Opera presentations like *East Is Red* were inspirations although we introduced Western and Filipino techniques as well. Most of all, we learned to sense the pulse of the audience and their susceptibility to our delicate demands. Of course, we were spurred to work better from constant study of the little Red Book as well as regular DGs or discussion groups. Soon, I was part of a small group composed of Tony, Mon, Toks and Louie.

I had to solve logistical, technical and legal problems latent to *Barikada*. How could I stage the epic saga that was the Diliman Commune? Where would I get the huge cast? How could I have the costumes, weaponry and machines like helicopters of the military that attacked us? Since my cast was mostly made up of students, where would I get middle-aged potbellied men to play the Metrocom? I would certainly be liable for libel or whatever considering the suspended writ.

On the other hand, how could I have thousands of UP students and faculty, along with campus residents and University Belt supporters? How could I stage the defenses on four sides of the huge campus? Where would I get the desks, trees and stones used for the barricades? How could I have hundreds of policemen, dozens of police cars, police helmets, armors, weaponry, helicopters and the like?

It was impossible!

Since Nes Jacinto, a fraternity brother in the Upsilon promised he would lend us his first-hand documentation of those historic days, I decided to use slides of the actual events to augment the film. That way I could have scope, the logistics, and the grandeur. I would also not be accused of having *staged* anything untrue because the slides were of the actual event that had been published in reputable dailies.

Therefore, instead of staging the attacks and acts of police brutality, I merely flashed dozens of slides of such events gleaned from front pages of *Manila Times*, *Manila Chronicle*, *Philippine Herald* and other dailies. Three big screens on the mammoth UP Theater stage were used for maximum effect. One giant screen was on center stage while two smaller ones were built off left and right of the main stage.

When an actor warned about the coming of the Metrocom, I quickly flashed slides on the screens. As they came closer, we would use close shots. The slides had a life and meaning of their own. My actors on stage related to the action of the slides. Lights, sound effects and music punctuated the action and suspense. It was spine-tingling for an audience who had been part of or witnessses or shocked observers of the historic event.

Barikada was so popular with FQS activists that we filled up the UP Big Theater for several performances with repeats in the Meralco Theater no less and the Abelardo Hall. Of course, the production was laden with popular slogans of the era with *himagsikan* as the call to action at the end of the performance. Tos and two actors waved huge red flags on stage while the rest of the cast of 50 surrounded the auditorium with other red flags as they sang *Internationale*. It was a sea of red! There was no doubt as to what our political affiliation was, for which reason an intimidated batch of Vanguard neophytes demonstrated against the show's obvious leanings outside the theater. They were a pitiable lot considering the size of our audience in what was called the Big Theater. This audience robustly responded to our angry demands for radical and, yes, violent change

The Abelardo performance was timed for an International Theater Conference but because of the nature of the show, *Barikada* was not included by the organizers in the formal program of the conference. However, a Malaysian playwright went to see the performance on his own and excitedly informed the rest of the delegates about it. Two days later, two busloads of delegates came to experience Proletarian Theater, GS-style. Jacques Lang who was to become France's Minister of Culture was among them. When he saw *The Short Short Life of Citizen Juan*, an Amelia Lapeña Bonifacio play I directed for Sigma Delta, the UP sorority under the leadership of Queen of the Pacific Nelia Sancho, he complimented me by noting how disparate the directorial styles were.

Of course, a *Barikada* kind of a production had never ever been done before and never since then. It was a product of and an answer to the demands of its time. However, excerpts (choral numbers, skits and songs) of it were presented in rallies and demonstrations in the following months before martial law was declared.

It was a production that came out of a vision and a purpose that succeeded despite the obvious absence of required logistics. Instead, it depended mainly on people power, commitment, creative imagination, a sense of purpose and initiative because as the song went, *Ang Tao ang Mahalaga*.

Reach: Mainstream and Regional

After the successful staging of *Barikada*, Gintong Silahis buckled down to community work and organizing in Manila as well as the environs. We participated in daily rallies that culminated in historic Plaza Miranda. Since we led the rallies with spirited singing and chanting of newly created slogans, we were eyeball to eyeball with the helmeted, truncheon wielding and armored Metrocom. When violent dispersals took place, we experienced its harsh reality.

Chapters were set up in Baguio, Cabanatuan, Los Baños, Iloilo, Bacolod and Cebu. Select GS cadres were assigned to develop the branches.

We also became active members of cultural alliances that had been set up. The GS had rallied against the construction of the mammoth Cultural Center as well as the Little Theater. We consciously combined *Form* with *Message* so GS soon was a skilled, disciplined, innovative but relevant theatrical troupe able to enter hallowed halls of Mainstream Culture like the Girls Scout Auditorium, Abelardo Hall, Phil-Am Life Auditorium and the posh Meralco. In Plaza Miranda we shared the stage with Panday Sining, Tanghalang Bayan and the Philippine College of Commerce's (PCC, now Polytechnic University of the Philippines or PUP) Kamanyang.

Tanghalang Bayan was an urban poor cultural group from Tondo under Ka Levi. Panday Sining was under the direction of Upsilon brod Leo Rimando. I did not realize an unspoken rivalry was a-brewing with GS until someone noted that the two groups were apparently outdoing each other in the number of times we crossed the hammer and sickle in public. Naturally, those drew loud cheers from dyed-in-the-wool activists but may well have frightened the politically uninitiated. The satiric Kamanyang of PCC under Eleanor Rose

Gomez was more appealing to the ordinary Juan and Maria de la Cruz in the rallies. But, GS and TB incorrectly considered them politically lacking.

Because the core members of the GS performing group lived together in the HQ nicknamed Boni, we had daily practice, assessment and improvement honed by constant performances and political study. Sometimes, we had three stints in a day agitating crowds in rallies, under the heat of the afternoon sun, despite rain and sometimes under a hail of bullets.

A GS contingent performed in the Long March from Laguna to Manila. We crisscrossed Laguna towns before we made a triumphal Manila entry. We slept on top of desks and high school chairs inside inundated public high school classrooms.

A sore eyes epidemic was prevalent. I felt safe because I took medical precautions but a fellow GS member complained of feeling feverish so I quickly gave him my last two antibiotic pills. It turned out he never took them for fear he was allergic to them. On the other hand, because I did not finish the required cycle, I saw Manila through red eyes when the Long March ended in Plaza Miranda.

We did the same during the 1972 Central Luzon flood. We sang with gusto over thunderstorms and clenched our fists despite lightning, fatigue and incipient fevers.

The press documented our efforts with sympathy. I popularized Proletarian Theater theories through articles, lectures in schools here, there and everywhere. I would fly to Iloilo, Bacolod, Cebu and Davao to give workshops. I would win adherents to the cause in private and public schools in Metro Manila and the provinces.

I didn't comprehend the real meaning of UF (united front, or alliance work with other sectors) until the kindly Sammy Rodriguez, a comrade of Ka Amado V. Hernandez¹ and previously of the Lava brothers² sat me down one afternoon. He encouraged me with the direction I was taking since I was

¹ Amado V. Hernandez was a poet and novelist who became a National Artist. He was detained for a long time for activities as member of the 1930-founded *Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas*. From his court case arose the famous *Hernandez doctrine* in Philippine jurisprudence that certain common crimes like murder committed in furtherance of political offenses like rebellion are considered "absorbed" in the latter and not treated as separate crimes.

² On the Lava brothers, see footnote 1, p. 10.

beginning to include friends from the mainstream cultural scene to support our cause by appearing in our productions.

For funds, we held an exhibit-sale in the National Museum in Herran then under the directorship of playwright Jesus Peralta. Some of the most prominent visual artists donated paintings and sculpture pieces. Ocampo, Joya, Manansala, Aguinaldo, Abueva, Dans, Saprid and countless young artists were generous donors of their works.

The cultural scene had so altered by 1972 that PETA and educational institutions were presenting mainly socially-relevant plays instead of Western classics and *veladas*. Even Repertory Philippines, advocates of Broadway and West End, re-staged Brecht's *Mother Courage* (first presented in 1969) with its artistic director Zeneida Amador, co-founder Baby Barredo, Celia Diaz Laurel and First Daughter Imee Marcos, no less in the cast

When Luis Araneta and Conchita Sunico staged *The Best of Broadway*, an extra lavish production with some of Manila's most prominent musical talents, Kontras, a cultural alliance, staged a spoof *The Pest of Broadway* outside the Leandro Locsin edifice. Many years later in 1977, I was asked to direct a play for the refurbished Metropolitan Theater. Its head, Miss Sunico, warned Tony Mabesa, the artistic director, "That Cervantes might direct a rally against us again, ha?"

When we performed in Meralco Theater, a perturbed Mariquit Lopez, wife of Vice President Fernando Lopez, could only ask me to extend her best wishes to my parents after she and other *doñas* were moved by the stirring performance. Sammy prodded me to broaden even more.

By August 1972, Gintong Silahis reaped the fruits of its labor and thus was able to attract mainstream performers for *Isang Gabi ng Awit at Tulang Makabayan* staged at the Phil-Am Life Auditorium in early September. Performances in the UP Big Theater on the second week of September followed. Little did we know what would befall us on September 21.

The show was highly successful. Gintong Silahis performed in tip-top form. I inveigled friends like Felipe de Leon Jr., Loretta Lichauco, Mylene Castro, a daughter of a general, and journalist Arlene Babst to help backstage. I also asked Pilar Pilapil, Fred Montilla, Vic Silayan, Rita Gomez as well as Zeneida Amador to read Amado V. Hernandez's poems. Both Ka Amado and Atang

de la Rama³ were in attendance. Boy Camara and Jay Ilagan rendered activist songs while Nelia Sancho, the Queen of the Pacific,⁴ was part of a GS dancing ensemble. Sammy was generous with his congratulations.

We were on the front page of the popular magazine *Asia-Philippines Leader* for its September 21 issue but Ferdinand Marcos had declared martial law. It was never published. I was given a copy by editor Greg Brilliantes but it was confiscated by the military during one of my arrests.

Considering the gains and incursions Proletarian Art had made in mainstream consciousness, Marcos was right in declaring martial law to protect his interest.

Who knows where Gintong Silahis and other advocates of People's Art would have taken our country had Marcos not aborted our mission to transform our people through culture? A culturally empowered people would have charted their own destiny with transforming values and aesthetic tastes. That was our mission and our vision.

2005

³ Atang de la Rama was a well-known *zarzuela* star and the wife of Amado V. Hernandez.

⁴ Nelia Sancho won the "Queen of the Pacific" beauty pageant in 1971. She later became a nat-dem activist and, in more recent years, has identified with the causes of women in general, specially of "comfort women" (sex slaves of Japanese soldiers during the Second World War).

SDK: Militant but Groovy

Stories of Samahang Demokratiko ng Kabataan

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and Paz Verdades M. Santos

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