C HICAGO (jGLi) – Imagine Frank Sinatra crooning Filipino kun diman (love song) “Dahil Sa’Yo” (Because of You) or international singers warbling Freddie Aguilar’s “Anak” (Child).

Whether the foreign singers hit a thick or thin Tagalog accent, it
This is exactly what this reporter felt while listening to a multi-accented cast of actors, who interpreted the Filipino national artist Felipe Padilla de Leon’s masterpiece of Filipino national hero Jose Rizal’s “Noli Me Tangere, The Opera” in Tagalog during a two-day world premiere in Chicago, Illinois on May 26 and 27 at Harris Theater for Music and Dance.

But non-Tagalog readers or speakers were not really lost in translation, if not left in the dark, as the case maybe, as there were “supertitles” though in very small laser prints barely visible to the naked eye located very high above the stage that let them somehow figure out what the actors were singing.
One of the advisors of the Opera, Princess Emraida Kiram said out of the 50-something cast of characters, there were six Filipinos. The rest are collection of various nationalities.

According to Director Maria Pietra Santa, “tackling Felipe de Leon’s Noli Me Tangere is a daunting task. (But) we are especially proud of our very diverse cast of many colors, comprised of singers and musicians from countries including the U.S.A., the Philippines, Canada, Bulgaria, Greece, Brazil and Mexico.”

The baritone voice of bulky Russell Hoke, who played the role of Pilosopong Tasio, had some of the more recognizable Tagalog words when he was looking for Crispin (Blake Barnickle) and Basilio (Carina Milano, an 11-year-old schoolgirl), “Saan kayo naroroon?” (where are the two of you?).
COMPOSER OF ANAK DALITA & PASKO NA NAMAN

But Steven Wallace, an African American and a tenor, playing the leading role of Crisostomo Ibarra (the fictional character of author, Rizal), and Mila Koleva (Maria Clara), a Bulgarian and soprano, were forceful as they burst into songs composed by De Leon, who is being honored by KGB Productions and da Corneto Opera on his birth centennial and the novel’s 125th year with the presentation of the opera commemorating the Asian-Pacific Heritage Month in the U.S.

De Leon, who had been known for such haunting classics as “Anak Dalita,” and Christmas carols (Pasko na Naman
and folk songs (Sarung Banggi), had immortalized in his opera two arias, “Kay Tamis ng Buhay” and “Awit ni Sisa” that are now part of international repertoire.

“I enjoyed the opera of course,” a beaming Philippine Consul General Leo M. Herrera-Lim allowed. “Although, the Filipino songs were delivered in different accents that carried different projections of songs, I clearly understood the opera.”

Alvaro Ramirez, bass, a Mexican, playing the role of Padre Damaso, drew a mix of cheers and jeers with
his realistic performance of the reviled character.

Mr. Ramirez later said, he loved his role as a “villain and a bad guy. He puts everything in motion and makes a lot of people very unhappy.”

Rica San Agustin-Goldyn, soprano, a Filipina, was very natural in her role of Sisa by blending her musical flair with her non-verbal vertigo-inducing rotating routine of a demented mother of two missing sons falsely accused of theft.
But the opera ended with the tragic deaths of Sisa and Elias played by Karrel G. Bernardo, baritone and a Filipino, a disciple of Crisostomo Ibarra that personified both Rizal’s characters.

RIZAL PREDICTED HIS DEATH IN HIS NOVEL 9 YEARS PRIOR

Mr. Bernardo, a registered nurse (a graduate of University of Santo Tomas) and a veteran opera singer of seven years, is also the producer of the Opera that Consul General Herrera-Lim believes will “enrich our humanity and unique Filipino art and culture as well highlight the inter-generational efforts to bridge gap among ages.”
Bernardo is happy the opera was well received and he hopes people will continue to support similar venture.

Elias predicted Rizal’s death by firing squad in the novel published in Spanish in Berlin nine years prior (1887) with his last lines in Tagalog: “I die without seeing the dawn brighten over my native land. You, who have to see it, welcome it. And forget not those who have fallen amidst the darkness.”

The other Filipino or Filipino-American actors in the
opera were Christine Cabiltes, mezzo soprano, Isabel; Judith Seghers, soprano, Sinang: Joachim Luis, tenor, Don Filipo, Tony Abellera, utusan/picknicker/sacristan; Willi Red Buhay (costume designer), a Manila celebrated design-artist-painter.

The Opera did not only break the language barrier. I also blurred sexual lines when an 11-year-old schoolgirl, Carina Milano, played the role of a boy, Basilio.

The Opera has three acts.
A veteran in local Filipino American scene, Emil Nicolasin said, “puede rin palang gawing (magpresent ng Tagalog opera) kahit nang hindi natin kalahi” (It turns out Tagalog opera can also be presented even by people from other races). Mr. Nicolasin, local actor in some TV comedy skit in Chicago’s “Hataw Pinoy Chicago” and played the musical instrument kulintan in the recent “Rizal’s Sweet Stranger, Untold Stories of Josephine Bracken, the Musical,” added the “Noli Me Tangere, The Opera” was a success and needs to “have a re-run” so more can view it. He agreed to suggestions that the same Opera should also be presented by an all-Filipino cast.

**ATTY. LOIDA NICOLAS-LEWIS TRAVELLED TO CHICAGO**
Such production, however, can still continue to be part of the local cultural scene if some supporters, like prominent Filipino American Atty. Loida Nicolas-Lewis, will continue to patronize it. Despite her hectic schedule, Mrs. Lewis traveled to Chicago to witness the world premiere.

Princess Emraida said, however, “I know of another Filipino opera (in English) that is of a more recent composition, which is also historical. But in terms of grandeur, power and majesty, none will surpass the NOLI. It is my honest belief that we will not see a production similar to this in our lifetime. And those who were fortunate enough to see the opera, will remember this as a landmark event in their lives, and my God, I know they will talk about this for a long, long time and I hope they do not do so with regrets.”
Another daunting challenge in the opera was to putting together a 37-piece orchestra in this sixteenth season of da Corneto (dCO), an Illinois not-for-profit enterprise “created by singers for singers,” to emphasize musical over “visual” in the “video age of opera.”

The dCO presents “operas in the original language with expanded English supertitles. Professional singers are featured in leading and supporting roles, featuring a full opera drawn from the Chicagoland area and led by paid section leaders.” # # #

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“Noli Me Tangere,” The Opera, Sung in Tagalog By Foreigners! - MabuhayRadio

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