

Written by

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By JOSEPH G. LARIOS

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CHICAGO (*jGLi*) – I was dragging my feet to watch “Rizal’s Sweet Stranger, Untold Stories of Josephine Bracken, The Musical” after its co-executive producer Louella Maningas Cabalona of SamaSama Project reserved for me a couple of complimentary tickets.

I wanted to watch it during the gala’s world premiere at 7:00 p.m. last Saturday, Sept. 24, at the St. Scholastica Academy Theater at Chicago’s far north side, instead of the matinee at 2:00 p.m. earlier, because I thought performers would put their best foot forward since I always believe that more practice or rehearsal makes perfect.

In fact, I came in 15 minutes late because I thought the musical that would attempt to unravel the mystery of the role of Ms. Bracken in the love life of Philippine national hero Jose Rizal would just be a bore, if not a blur.

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For a few minutes into the musical, I was on the edge of my seat, waiting for the performers to commit a faux pas from their lines. But when I noticed that the delivery of their lines had the right cadence, timbre, quality and volume, I started to relax and I rested back on my seat.

Except for the non-mention of “Katipunan” (group) when the Ms. Bracken (played by Antoinette Gomez, an ingénue for her role) was introduced as member of the revolutionary secretive society of “Kagalangalangan, Kataas-taas ng (Katipunan) ng mga Anak ng Bayan” (KKK) by a woman revolutionary member cast, the whole docu-melodrama was not only educational but a breath of fresh air among previous musicals, including “Miss Saigon” staged in Chicago that I watched before.

For a shoestring budgeted musical with a cast of less than a hundred, “Rizal’s Sweet Stranger” should be exposed to a bigger audience for the nationalistic message that it invokes.

Unfortunately, Ms. Cabalona told me it would be very daunting and challenging to keep the musical going. The musical was staged primarily to pay homage to the 150th birth anniversary celebration of Dr. Rizal who changed the course of his nation. It is understandable from a logistics point of view, unless the four-million Filipino Americans will clamor for its long-running encore by subscribing to some kind of a season ticket to support the bottom lines of its cast and production staff from SamaSama Project and the Center for Immigrant Resources and Community Arts (CIRCA)-Pintig.

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The low-pitched voice of Ariel Dayanghirang, who played the lead role of Dr. Rizal, was just perfect for his multi-lingual delivery of Tagalog, English and Spanish. It brought out the gentlemanly, humanity and Rizal’s love for his country and his fellowmen.

I did not have a chance to get information from Ms. Gomez (Ms. Bracken) as the cast would only be available to mingle with guests (and probably selected media types), during the gala, although from the looks of it, she is Chicago-born and 100 percent non-Filipino, which is perfect for her role since Ms. Bracken was an Irish immigrant in Hong Kong.

Ms. Gomez’s brief question from a supporting cast, “Asan siya? (where is Dr Jose Rizal?)” and other snatches of Tagalog were delivered in unnoticeable accents, sitting well with a sparse audience of mostly Filipino Americans and officials of the Philippine Consulate led by Consul General Leo M. Herrera-Lim and some non-Filipinos, which included my email pal, Roger F. Maslon, a Polish American married to a Filipina, who said the musical and “the way this staging and Lani (Misalucha)’s performance pierced my heart, tells me how much I love the Philippines.”

What sets the musical apart are the haunting background and music by Dr. Cleofe Guangko Casambre. The tempo of the music from Act One to Act two was consistent but not boring from the beginning to the end, which was aided by a good and booming acoustics of the theater.

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But the songs, “Will You Be My Eyes” and “Lullaby for a Lost Child” both by William Elvin Manzano and both interpreted by Ms. Gomez had left lasting impressions for a graduate of the American Academy of Dramatic Arts West in Hollywood, California and had few credits in FILM – The Company Theater – The King and I (Lady Thiang), Footloose (Vi Moore) to name a couple plus a Best Actress in a Musical Ward by the Northwest Indiana Excellence in Theater Foundation.

Her duet in “Parallel Lives” with Mr. Dayanghirang was outstanding, validating his award for the Region 4 (Metro Manila) of the National Music Competition for Young Artists Solo Voice Category. His acting ability showed his flashes as a scholar under the Actors Company of Tanghalang Pilipino and the resident theater group of the Cultural Center of the Philippines.

The difficult cultural dance singkil looked very easy but it was telling the audience that Ms. Bracken and her adoptive father, George Taufer, were being welcomed in Dapitan.

But what brought down the house was the featured role of Las Vegas, Nevada-based Filipino American diva Lani Misalucha for singing “Bayan Ko” (My Nation/People) during the Act Two’s “Sa Sariling Bayan” segment that was greeted with a standing ovation.

Kudos also to my friend, Nina Mae Vidal, who played the role of Dona Victorina, Dona Teodora and as part of the Ensemble, for singing Gamugamo; veteran Chicago area actor Bert Matias for playing the role of George Taufer, whose eye problem led him and Ms. Bracken to the doorsteps of Dr. Rizal’s clinic in Dapitan; Chicago entertainment TV host Jovie Calma for her meaty roles as Gabriela Silang, Trinidad Alonzo Mercado Rizal and Ensemble; and Chicago TV mainstay Emilio Nicolasin, who played Kulintangan.

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The credit for the theme of the musical should go to its director, Dr. Anton Juan, Ph. D., playwright and artistic director, who drew inspiration from the reality that Bracken was a “perfect foil for the histori-romantico revolutionary that is Jose Rizal.”

Dr. Anton said it was no sweat for him to give Bracken the eponymous role. She was a woman from “Ireland, that like the Philippines, has been defining its own identity against its history of oppression under imperial expansionism; a woman loved by a national hero but also a woman accused to be a spy of Spaniards; a widow stripped of the title of being Rizal’s wife but who joins the revolutionary ranks and rides in the battle against the Spanish forces, to help attain her husband’s dream of freedom for the Filipino people; and a woman, who dies alone, bereft of remembrance by the Filipino people, who laugh at themselves and their natural tragedies, including historical ruptures.

Saving his best for last, Dr. Anton recalled of his encounter with a Filipina in Greece, where he was student of Semiotics (study of the meaning of things). Thinking that he was a seaman or domestic, the only works available in that country for Filipinos, the Filipina asked him about his work. He replied, "a student." When he asked her job, she replied, “E, anu pa, KKK.” When he clarified, “Katipunan?” She gave her a very hurtful and shocking reply, “Kud Kod Kubeta” or Toilet Scrubbers”! # # #

Editor’s Note: To contact the author, please e-mail him at: (lariosa_jos@sbcglobal.net)

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