



Awakening Philippine Cultural Consciousness in the Youth through Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio's *Papet Pasyon*

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Abstract

This article aims to explore how the staging of *Papet Pasyon*, a children's play by Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio, a Philippine National Artist, impart and continues to communicate to the local younger audience an understanding of culture and an appreciation of the art of puppetry. This is then followed by the conceptualization of the actual staging of the play vis-à-vis her vision of a children's theatre. Afterward, *Papet Pasyon* is asserted as a pedagogy for younger audiences. Results of the study show (1) how the pre-show conversation prepares the audience for the performance and how it provides an understanding of Filipino cultural traditions and an appreciation of the art of puppetry; (2) how the performance serves as a venue for experiential learning; (3) how the art of puppetry challenges one's imagination in manipulating the puppet (in the case of the puppeteer) and in creating meanings from what they hear and see onstage (in the case of the audience); (4) cooperation and integration are made evident by the interactions between the puppet and the puppeteer and the puppet and puppeteer with the audience; and (5) that although puppetry is foreign to the audience, they have expressed appreciation of the art form by repeatedly watching the performance through the years.

Keywords: children's theatre; Philippine performance tradition; papet pasyon; theatre and education

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1970s, Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio, then a professor of English at the University of the Philippines Diliman and a playwright, observed that Filipino children were more familiar with Western-oriented shows, such as Jim Henson's *Sesame Street* and early Japanese anime, such as *Voltes V*. Her fellowship to travel in Europe and Asia made her realize that the Philippines lack storybooks and television programs for children. On her visit to Germany, she was surprised to see a Bible made specifi-

cally for children.

The passion play in Oberammergau, Germany, which happens every ten years since 1634, inspired Lapena-Bonifacio to write *Papet Pasyon*. From being a religious drama, the "world's largest, longest-running, and most famous passion play" has become a community theater that the villagers continue to fulfill as a religious vow (Ohm, 2010). Similarly, Lapena-Bonifacio wanted to stage a passionate play for children, which materialized with the premiere of *Papet Pasyon* in 1985.

It was also when her daughter was

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growing up extremely fond of the story of *Cinderella*. From her research on Asian and Philippine drama and insights gained from trips in Southeast and East Asia, Lapeña-Bonifacio decided to write plays for young audiences based on folktales, establish a children's theatre company, Teatrang Mulat ng Pilipinas (MULAT), and stage her plays to promote the Filipino and Asian heritage.

According to Columnist Winnie Velasquez (1978),

“Teatro (MULAT) has noble and inspired beginnings. It came at a time when Pilipino as a language for the stage was gaining stature and filling a cultural void. It answered the creative stirrings in the Filipino youngster, who has been reared in the shadow of Snow White, Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, and other Western fairy tales—mediums that exposed and enamored him of alien ideas” (p. 40).

Perhaps Lapeña-Bonifacio's maternal instinct to introduce to her child the beauty of Philippine and Asian cultures led her to share her works with a bigger audience. Aside from introducing Filipino children's plays, she also managed to introduce Asian puppetry, eventually leading to the creation of a Filipino puppet. Hence, she is recognized as the Mother of Puppetry in the Philippines and was bestowed the Order of National Artists, the highest recognition for Filipino artists who have made significant contributions to Philippine arts, in 2018 (Llamas, 2019)

This essay is a historical and narrative description of Lapeña-Bonifacio's life and masterwork, *Papet Pasyon*, and its valuable contribution to Philippine theatre, especially for younger audiences. The staging of *Papet Pasyon* has imparted and continues to communicate to the younger audience, and even to the play's young puppeteers, an understanding of Filipino cultural traditions, particularly the *pasyon* (oral tradition) and the *sinakulo* (traditional theatre form), and an appreciation of the art of puppetry. Lapeña-Bonifacio's belief in the power of puppets in communica-

ting and reaching out to young audiences is an example of what Tarja Kröger and Anne-Maria Nupponen's comment that “puppets should not only be nice products that perform in a well-prepared puppet show but puppets should be integrated into various contexts to support learning” (2019, p. 399).

In Indonesia, the Balinese *wayang wayu* was developed in the 1960s as an alternative communication medium to spread God's revelation, as recounted by the Bible. The images of Jesus and Mary were patterned after Balinese wayang characters to fuse Christian and Balinese cultures (Poplawska, 2004; Darmawan et al., 2023).

The impact of *Papet Pasyon* performance will be analyzed using Kröger and Nupponen's framework of a pedagogical puppet which identified five potential uses of puppets: (1) generating communication, (2) supporting a positive classroom climate, (3) enhancing creativity, (4) fostering cooperation in and integration into a group, and (5) changing attitudes (p. 399). We begin the discussion by exploring Lapeña-Bonifacio's vision of a theatre for young audiences in the Philippines. This is then followed by the conceptualization of the actual staging of the play vis-à-vis her vision. Afterward, we look at how *Papet Pasyon* is used as a pedagogy for younger audiences. We describe the potential of the play as a means of creative expression and an alternative learning environment, as well as how it enhances creativity, fosters integration, and awakens one's consciousness of one's own culture, tradition, and the arts.

Papet Pasyon is the Philippines' first passion play in puppetry dedicated to young audiences. Several passion plays in the Philippines have been scrutinized and interrogated as cultural traditions. For instance, the passion play in Cutud has been a favorite subject in anthropology and performance studies (Tantingco, 2006; Tiatco & Ramolete, 2008; Tiatco, 2010, 2016; Bautista, 2017). The Moriones on the island of Marinduque is another popular passion play in Philippine cultural studies (Peter-

son, 2007, 2016). The *Papet Pasyon* deserves the same kind of examination, especially since it plays an important role in preparing children and youth to be future audiences and cultivating the talent of young artists.

METHOD

One way to understand *Papet Pasyon* as a performance genre is its contextual adaptation based on different sources. This contextual adaptation may be understood as an act of intertextuality. Marko Juvan (2008) and Sarah Cardwell (2018) both attest to how an awareness of intertextuality could enhance one's appreciation, understanding, and interpretations of any cultural phenomenon, such as a narrative or a performance. Intertextuality augments and enhances any adaptation and is argued to be part of artistic integrity. Therefore, a recognition of intertextuality is crucial to a fair and sensitive criticism and interpretation of any cultural phenomenon.

Intertextual methodology is grounded in the belief that no text exists in isolation. Each performance is a product of various interconnected influences from other cultural performances, translating it into theatre and performance studies texts, cultures, historical periods, and ideologies. By studying these intertextual relationships, we can shed light on the complexities of producing and consuming a cultural performance, revealing hidden patterns, allusions, and references (Juvan, 2008; Cardwell, 2018).

In this methodology, there is a proposition that the meaning is not inherent in the text, but it is constructed through the interaction between the reader and the text, making intertextuality a key component of textual interpretation. In the case of this study, the meaning is constructed in the interaction between the audience and the performance, making intertextuality a key component of the performance analysis. On the other hand, employing this methodology examines explicit and implicit references to other texts within the analyzed

cultural performance by reflecting the range of references from the most obvious to the more subtle ones, indicating the artist's engagement with a broader cultural performance tradition. In other words, there is an effort to investigate instances of direct and implicit borrowing or adaptations of cultural products from other sources (Juvan, 2008). These instances offer valuable insights into the evolution of narratives (in literary studies) or performances (in theatre and performance studies) and the evolution of cultural ideas.

By highlighting the interconnectedness of cultural products, intertextual methodology challenges the notion of a single authoritative author. Instead, it underscores the collective nature of cultural creation and the ongoing dialogue between the authors, the texts, and the readers (Cardwell, 2018). In the case of theatre and performance, it highlights the ongoing collaboration of artists, cultural products, and the public (or audiences).

Our use of intertextual methodology in this paper is also significant as it allows us to place *Papet Pasyon's* performance within its historical, cultural, and ideological contexts. This perspective helps identify shared cultural references and understand how a cultural product, such as the above-mentioned cultural piece, responds to and shapes prevailing social discourses.

Intertextual methodology is an approach to explore the interconnectedness of various sources and understanding the complex dynamics of creating and receiving a cultural product. Unpacking the layers of intertextuality can unveil new perspectives on familiar sources, challenge established interpretations, and gain valuable insights into the ever-evolving nature of performance, culture, and tradition.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio and Her Vision of a Theatre for Young Audiences

Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio was born on April 4, 1930, and grew up in Binondo, Manila. In the online video produced

by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, she remembers how her folks brought her to makeshift theaters to watch traditional theatre performances produced by local troupes such as the *sinakulo* (local passion-play, depicting the life and sufferings of Jesus Christ), *balagtasan* (poetic joust), *zarzuela* (traditional musical), *bodabil* (vaudeville), and *carillo* (shadow play). But, the *sinakulo* was her favorite. She remembers sitting with her family in a vacant lot near Calle Magdalena in Binondo, watching Christ's story for nine nights. In the same video and an online interview by Luna Sicat-Cleto, she mentions that she grew up seeing no performances dedicated to children (UP Open University, 2014).

Her inclination towards creative writing and the theatre became evident when she was a student at the Arellano High School. Lapeña-Bonifacio started her writing career when she became a staff member of The Chronicler school paper. In the same High School, her first theatre exposure was to design the set for the school play *The Romancers* by Edmond Rostand. In college, at the University of the Philippines, her first theatre work was also to design the set for Virginia Moreno's *Glass Altars* and a fraternity jazz concert. Her talent as a designer was once again showcased when the university asked her to design the set for the International Dance Festival held at the University Theater. While doing theatre, she was also appointed literary editor of the college paper, the *Philippine Collegian* (Pacis, 2010).

Lapeña-Bonifacio graduated in 1953 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. She wrote her first two plays in English as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In 1958, she completed her Master's degree in Theatre and Drama and returned to the Philippines as an instructor at the Department of Speech and Drama and later moved to the Department of English in 1960.

Between 1973 and 1974, she had the opportunity to observe traditional theatre forms in Southeast Asia and East Asia, having been awarded the Asia Studies on

the Pacific Coast Research Fellowship and Ford Foundation Southeast Asian Research Fellowship. She immediately fell in love with the Japanese *bunraku* (a puppet manipulated by three puppeteers) and vowed to introduce this beautiful art form and narrate stories from which the Filipino youth can learn (CCP PCEP, 2020).

Lapeña-Bonifacio's exposure to the traditional theatre forms of Southeast Asia and East Asia inspired her to write plays for young audiences. Her desire to introduce to her daughter a Cinderella story closer to Filipino culture resulted in the writing of *Abadeja: Ang Ating Sinderela* (Abadeja: Our Cinderella), a full-length musical adaptation of a folk story from the province-island of Leyte in the Visayan region. Lapeña-Bonifacio explains:

"My interest for the children's theater was whetted by the utter lack of reading materials for children which can edify the young minds on the kind of culture we have [...] Actually, I just wanted first to let the children know, through the dramatic form, that we have some folktales" (in Santos 1979, p. 28).

When the Department of Speech and Drama invited her to stage one of her plays, she decided to mount *Abadeja*. She wanted a theatre for young audiences. In the beginning, her colleagues at the Department were not exactly enthusiastic about staging a children's play, more so, a puppet production. However, Lapeña-Bonifacio explains that the engagement of theatre for young audiences is a gloriously happy stage (in Pacis, p. 227), preparing them to be morally responsible individuals in the future. On December 12, 1977, *Abadeja* premiered at the Wilfrido Ma. Under her direction, Guerrero Theater uses puppets inspired by the Indonesian *wayang golek* (rod puppet) designed by Rafael del Casal with music by Felipe de Leon, Jr. In a review by an anonymous writer in *The Philippine Collegian*, the premiere of arguably the first production intended for the youth in the Philippines was described as:

"It is able to express the thoughts and feelings of the greater majority of Fi-

lipinos, using a form, though at a glance foreign, becomes readily acceptable because it borders on our culture [...] This is especially heart-warming since 'ABADEJA' is children's play, which is 'restricted' to mere didacticism. As a children's play, it is, of course, moralistic yet the author uses all delicacies and subtleties when moralizing. However, it is simple and easily comprehensible. It is for the young and the not-so-young, who still retain that noble capacity to dream, to be able to live 'happily ever after.'" (1978, p. 3)

After *Abadeja* bid goodbye to the audiences of the Wilfrido Ma. Guerrero Theatre, the puppeteers, who at that time were also students of the university, seemed to have enjoyed the experience of working with Lapeña-Bonifacio and kept visiting her in her Faculty Center office. In one of the visits, these students requested to do another production for the young audiences. This enthusiasm paved the way for the institution of her own theatre company, leading to the founding of Teatrong Mulat ng Pilipinas (MULAT), claiming *Abadeja* as its first official production.

Lapeña-Bonifacio chose the Filipino-Tagalog word *mulat*, which literally translates to consciously open one's eyes or to awaken. The choice of *Mulat* in the name of the company underscores her desire to awaken young audiences to the beauty and richness of Philippine culture and still unfamiliar Asian cultures. Lapeña-Bonifacio explained, "We can be more confident that we have a name to identify us and distinguish us from the rest of the world. We are the Asian people, unique with our own theater, with our customs, styles and features" (Cayabyab, 1978, p. 4). She wanted to tell Filipino stories as well as introduce the stories of neighboring Asian countries through the theatre, especially through the traditional puppet theatre traditions of Asia, which were not given much attention during that time (Maniquis & Zafra, 2020).

A year after staging animal stories based on Filipino folktales with actors wearing animal costumes, MULAT shifted back to puppetry in preparation for the

group's participation in the 1st International Workshop on Living Children's Theater in Asia held in Japan in 1979. Lapeña-Bonifacio challenged her young student artists to make rod puppets. The team used rubber for the puppet heads and hands. Unfortunately, the puppets did not last long while in storage due to the heat, which caused the deformation of the heads.

For the next play, Lapeña-Bonifacio decided to look for a woodcarver in Paete, Laguna (a province in Southern Luzon) which is famous for its wood carvings. She recalled how beautifully made the *bunraku* puppet heads were and wanted to do the same for MULAT puppet shows. She had difficulties looking for a carver who would agree to carve animal heads since they were used to carving religious figures. Fortunately, she met Mr. Justino Cagayat, Sr., who willingly carved the animal characters' heads, hands, and feet in the play 'The Trial among Animals'. Cagayat and, eventually, his son, Justino Jr., continue to serve as MULAT's puppet carvers.

Lapeña-Bonifacio's exposure to traditional theatre forms in Southeast Asia and East Asia led her to introduce the art of puppetry to Filipino audiences. Since the Philippines does not have a puppet tradition, she shared how she was mesmerized by the elegance of the Indonesian *wayang golek*, *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet), and Japanese *bunraku*.

Aside from being fascinated by the intricacies of the art of puppetry, Lapeña-Bonifacio saw the potential and power of the puppet to communicate with young audiences. In addition to the puppet serving as a mediator in communication, puppets are like dolls or toys, which is why they are less threatening to children Mickey Aronoff, in a different context, explains that puppetry is enjoyable, creating a non-threatening atmosphere within which trusting relationships can be formed, and social isolation is diminished (2005, p. 138). Helena Korošec even observed that Children unconditionally believe in the puppet's life; they trust it, identify

with it in certain situations, and solve their problems, or the puppet's problems – and they learn along the way (2012, p. 43).

Writing for children was a very exciting period for Lapeña-Bonifacio. She started writing plays based on Philippine folktales. Later, she wrote plays based on folk narratives of several Asian countries, such as *The Sixth Secret Weapon* (India), *King of the Jungle* (China), *The Counting of the Crocodiles* (Japan), and *You Cannot Please Everyone* (Malaysia). Lapeña-Bonifacio really wanted a theatre dedicated to young audiences. She ensured the storyline was simple and very clear since children have limited experience and language. She even emphasized in her UP Open University Video with Luna Sicat-Cleto:

“You have to be like a child yourself and write what is understandable to them, what they will appreciate. [...] Children are very honest as an audience. They're the most active audience” (Sicat-Cleto & Lapeña-Bonifacio, 2014).

In the video produced by the NCCA and UPOU Lapeña-Bonifacio also explains how she saw the important role of the theatre in the appreciation of the youth to history and culture. Remembering her childhood experience of watching the *sinakulo* with her family every year, Lapeña-Bonifacio dreamt of doing something that young audiences would understand and appreciate. She remembers watching the *Siete Palabras* (Seven Last Words) and seeing Christ dying on the cross. She was inspired by this imagery and saw the possibility of the carved figure of Christ becoming a puppet. This idea came into reality in 1985 with the premiere of *Papet Pasyon* (The Passion of Christ in Puppetry). *Papet Pasyon* is the sole *sinakulo* inspired by the *pasyon* performed in puppetry for young audiences. It is also the metropolis's longest-running and most traveled religious puppet play.

The Making of *Papet Pasyon*

Spain introduced Christianity to the Philippines in the 16th century. The Christianization of the islands began as a cul-

tural and political affair. Spanish missionaries saw themselves as soldiers of Christ waging war to overthrow the “devil” as manifested in the natives' pagan religion. Historian John Leddy Phelan explains, “Christianity was presented [...] not as a perfect expression of their pagan beliefs but as something new. Any resemblance between the two religions was dismissed as a diabolical conspiracy in which the devil deceived unbelievers by mimicking the rituals and beliefs of Christianity (2011, p. 53). Most islanders were converted to Christianity at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Nonetheless, there was one problem: several were baptized to the new religions, but the clergies were lacking. This paved the way for the ordination of locals to the priesthood, leading to what Phelan argues was an important catalyst for the Philippinization of Spanish Catholicism. Eventually, even the narrative of Christ found in the Scripture was localized, as in the *pasyon's* case and in the *sinakulo's* performance.

Lapeña-Bonifacio notes, “Realizing the effectiveness of the actual dramatization as opposed to readings and sermonizing, the Spanish friars tried to teach the Filipinos their new religion by the re-enactment of the various events in the life of Christ” (1972, p. 4). The dramatic presentation of the passion of Christ is popularly known as *sinakulo*. This is commonly performed for eight days, from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday (Fernandez, 1996). It starts at nine o'clock in the evening and may end at one or two past midnight. Aside from the *sinakulo*, a *pabasa* or the recitation of the narrative on Christ's life, passion, and death (known as *pasyon*) is also performed during Holy Week (*Semana Santa*).

Palm Sunday, or *Domingo de Ramos* in the Philippine vernacular, is the beginning of the *Semana Santa*. During *Domingo de Ramos* churchgoers wake up early in the morning to attend the procession of the *palaspas* (palm leaves) (Tiongson, 2000). On this day, the presiding priest of every Catholic Church enacts the grand entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem. For many Catholics

(approximately 86% of the total Philippine population), attending *palaspas* is a fulfillment and one of the many pledges of their allegiances to the Catholic Church. It is said that those who actively participate in these cultural traditions do so because of a *panata* or religious vow whereby the devotee promises to make some form of sacrifice for their faith in the hope of being rewarded.

In 1980, Lapeña-Bonifacio traveled to Germany to see the *Oberammergau*, the German passion play performed every ten years. However, she missed the performance since tickets were no longer available on her travel and stay dates in Germany. Nonetheless, Lapeña-Bonifacio could see another puppet play about the passionate narrative of Christ in Steinau, Germany. She met the play's director and the owner of the puppet theatre, Karl Magersuppe, who gladly toured her to the backstage of his puppet theater. Magersuppe handed over an autographed full-cover poster of the passion play, a children's Bible, and a children's book with colored photographs of a TV performance of the *Oberammergau* passion play and its script in German. A few months later, Lapeña-Bonifacio got an English translation of the *Oberammergau* from another friend residing in Germany.

When she returned home to the Philippines, she vowed to write her own passion play, inspired by the puppet performance she saw in Steinau and the children's Bible handed down to her by Magersuppe. Lapeña-Bonifacio decided to adapt the most important events in the passion narrative since Christ's life is complicated, and she wanted her young audiences to understand the life and suffering of Christ.

Lapeña-Bonifacio's treatment of the Scriptures is twofold: one of a literal transliteration (or a direct lift from the Bible to the stage) and another of a recontextualization.

Lines from the play that came from the Bible include The Lord's Prayer, the temptation of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, and Jesus' Seven Last Words.

In recontextualization, the texts from the scriptures are translated into Filipino – a transformation of one worldview to another since a word is not just a sound but a microcosm of its own. *Papet Pasyon* is based on the *Pasyong Genesis*, which narrates the life and works of Jesus Christ during his brief stay on earth. The presentation of the *Pasyong Genesis* is comprised of the following: (1) Birth of Christ, (2) Public Life of Christ, (3) Sufferings of Christ, and (4) Resurrection.

After rereading the *Pasyong Genesis*, a children's Bible, and the English version of the *Oberammergau* Passion Play, looking over photos of the book and many illustrations and even buying art pieces—a marble fresco of the Pieta and a reproduction of a crucified Christ—Lapeña-Bonifacio set the atmosphere for her to write the play.

The play's first draft was finished in May 1984, and the final draft in January 1985. She found it rather difficult to squeeze into a one-and-a-half-hour show the story of the Passion of Jesus Christ. She finally decided to choose the most important events: (1) the creation narrative; (2) Christ's entry to Jerusalem (Palm Sunday); (3) the cleansing of the temple (Holy Monday); Christ's healing of the sick and Magdalene's washing of His feet (Holy Tuesday); the meeting of Judas and Dathan and the meeting of Jesus and his mother Mary (Holy Wednesday); from Christ's last supper with his apostles and the washing of their feet to the agony in the garden of Gethsemane to His eventual arrest and Peter's denial of Him during the trial with Pilate (Maundy Thursday); trial before Herod and then back to Pilate leading to the cross and His death; and (4) Resurrection. Lapeña-Bonifacio transforms the Scripture into something relatable to young audiences, making the characters speak in the vernacular. According to Hizon (1986),

"Papet Pasyon is unique because its very form serves as a classic paradigm of the dynamism of the Philippine literary culture. It is a microcosm of how our cultural traditions are born of an ethnic

base but filled with layer upon layer of external influences which are subsequently indigenized and made our own. [...] Its main foundation, of course, is the story of Christ's passion as found in the native *pasyon* (Bonifacio's opus thus carries with it the value systems and the ideology lodged in the *pasyon*). This genre is in itself a local metamorphosis of the *pasyon* which seeped into our culture through the process of Christian proselytization." (p. 11)

While writing the play, work was being done on the design of the puppets. The artistic team's main concern was the design of the faces of Jesus and Mary. Will they pattern it after the Caucasian-looking images or figures seen in Catholic Churches or the Bible? Or, those seen in the movies and shown on television every Holy Thursday and Holy Friday? The discussion and arguments ended with the final decision of Lapeña-Bonifacio to make them "look Filipino—pugged noses and dark-skinned" (Tiatco and Ramolete, 2015, p. 59). The puppet's faces, hands, and feet were carved from wood and painted by the woodcarvers from Laguna.

For the second year of its staging, Lapeña-Bonifacio decided to include a puppet of the crucified Christ. She did not include the crucifixion scene during the premiere staging because she thought it would be too gruesome for young audiences. However, due to the feedback of some friends and after discussions with the MULLAT puppeteers, Lapeña-Bonifacio agreed to include the crucifixion scene since this shows the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus to atone for the sins of humanity. The scene does not show the actual nailing on the cross but reveals Jesus already on the cross saying His last words, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Psalm 31:5).

To compress the performance into less than an hour and a half without compromising the basic story, Lapeña-Bonifacio utilized projections on a screen which aided in moving the narrative forward. Examples of these include the opening scene, i.e. creation, serious talk of Jesus and Mary narrating Jesus' birth and immi-

nent death, and the crucifixion.

The *pasyon* is "written to be chanted before an altar during the Holy Week" (Lapeña-Bonifacio, 1972, p. 7). In her version of the *pasyon*, ten (10) songs were composed. The boy and girl narrators sang six songs to introduce the next scene. One song welcomed Jesus in Jerusalem, and one song each for Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Judas described their dilemmas in life. The songs, composed by Rodolfo de Leon, were accompanied by the strumming of a guitar. The voices for the child narrators were members of the choir group University of the Philippines (UP) Cherubim and Seraphim, composed of students from the UP Integrated School (Biñas, 2020). Aside from the songs, incidental music, using bamboo and other native instruments, was used to set a scene's action, mood, or transition between scenes. Theatre artists were invited to record their voices for the play. Lapeña-Bonifacio opted to record the voices to allow the puppeteers to concentrate on manipulating the puppets.

Directing the puppet play commenced in March 1985 with Benjamin Ramos as assistant director. The first day the group met, Lapeña-Bonifacio discussed the play's details and the puppets' assignment. Daily rehearsals took place in a shed beside the residence of Lapeña-Bonifacio inside the campus. The puppeteers, composed of high school and college students from the University of the Philippines in Diliman, came to rehearse after their classes. Lapeña-Bonifacio and Ramos had formal training in the theatre, but neither had formal training in puppet theatre. Through observation, watching puppet performances on videos, and exposure to puppet performances in international festivals, they worked together to train MULLAT members to manipulate the puppets. Puppeteers were taught the basics in manipulation--maintaining the puppet's level, establishing eye contact with other puppets, learning how to walk, enter and exit the stage, and knowing when and how the puppet should move. Puppeteers were encouraged to experiment on the move-

ments of their puppets and try these out when they were part of a scene. Aside from being puppeteers, each member is expected to learn how to set up and strike the puppet stage, take care and store the puppets, and clean the rehearsal space, among other things. After rehearsals, the Bonifacio household would share a meal with the MULAT members.

When MULAT members graduate from the university and eventually work, they do not have the time to join in the performances. But since they have performed in *Papet Pasyon*, MULAT alumni are invited to join the annual staging provided they have the time to attend the rehearsals usually held on weekends. This gives former members the opportunity to perform once again and get to know new members. Those who continue to perform have made it their *panata* (vow) to participate in *Papet Pasyon* as their offering in the observance of the Holy Week and as a reminder of and thanksgiving for Christ's blessings (Teatrong Mulat ng Pilipinas, 2020).

The Staging of *Papet Pasyon* for Young Audiences

Lapeña-Bonifacio believes that teaching Christ to children is very abstract, but when a puppet tells the story, the children start to listen (Alano, 1986, p. 9). *Papet Pasyon* premiered on a Good Friday, April 5, 1985, at the Tanghalang Aurelio Tolentino (Little Theater), Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) in Pasay City upon the invitation of then CCP President Lucrecia Kasilag. Lapeña-Bonifacio agreed to stage *Papet Pasyon* at the CCP because "she wants her children to know what it's like to sit on a nice seat at the posh Cultural Center, instead of an old warped bench (bangko) or on soggy ground (lupa)" (Alano, 1986, p. 9). She recalled how she carried her own bench as a child to watch a passion play in their neighborhood.

To reach out to more audiences, Lapeña-Bonifacio partnered with parishes and organizations so that communities could watch the performance. From the

CCP stage, *Papet Pasyon* was staged in different Catholic churches in the metropolis and, in the next years, in the nearby province of Bulacan, particularly at the St. Francis Chapel in Meycauayan, and in Intramuros, the walled and old city of Manila. In 1993, *Papet Pasyon* found its permanent home at the Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio Papet Teatro-Museo, MULAT's permanent theatre house in Quezon City. Since then, *Papet Pasyon* has been staged every Palm Sunday to signify the start of the Holy Week.

Setting the Palm Sunday performance became a tradition that MULAT members and *Papet Pasyon* audiences looked forward to. It allowed the MULAT members and its audiences to learn about the passion of Christ in a language and medium understandable to them. Although the target audience for *Papet Pasyon* is the youth, an equal number of adults usually watch because they accompany their child/younger sibling or because they are curious to watch. *Papet Pasyon* has been attributed as the only passion puppet play in the archipelago dedicated to young audiences (Tiatco & Ramolete, 2015; Biñas, 2020).

Every *Papet Pasyon* performance begins with Lapeña-Bonifacio welcoming the audience to the venue and performance. She would ask: *Alam n'yo ba kung ano ang pasyon?* [Do you know what a pasyon is?]; *Alam n'yo ba kung ano ang ipinagdiriwang natin ngayong linggo?* [Do you know what we are celebrating this week?]. She then explains that *Papet Pasyon* is based on the traditional Philippine literary narrative *pasyon* and a children's Bible, and was inspired by the German passion play *Oberammergau* and the Gospel stories. At the same time, Lapeña-Bonifacio emphasizes the morals and values of Christ's death and suffering to humankind. She would then ask the children if they understood why Christ had to die on the cross. Unanimously, the children would answer: "*Opo, dahil mahal Niya po tayo!*" [Yes, because He loves us so much]. Lapeña-Bonifacio then continues to tell the audience that, indeed, they are correct. The performance is a re-

collection of that love for everyone, so they must follow Christ as an example. Lapeña-Bonifacio then tells everyone to reflect on the death of Christ and think of it as the ultimate expression of God's love for humankind – giving His only Son to die on the cross.

She then explains that instead of actors performing, they will see puppets. Most would say they have not when asked if they have watched a puppet show before. She describes the puppets as being inspired by the Indonesian *wayang golek* and beautifully made by the woodcarvers of Paete, Laguna. She explains that the ones moving the puppets are called puppeteers who are wearing black costumes. Black, in Japanese *bunraku*, means being invisible. She would emphasize that they may be distracted by the hands or presence of the puppeteers, but eventually, these would fade away, especially when the puppeteers are able to move the puppets gracefully.

During this pre-show conversation, Lapeña-Bonifacio would remind her young audience that they should acknowledge what they feel about the scene. For instance, if they are terrified by the characters or feel sad about a scene, Lapeña-Bonifacio encouraged the children to describe the experience or the encounter to their adult companion. Lapeña-Bonifacio's grandchildren were terrified when the devil puppet came out the first time they watched the show. It is for this reason that she decided to include this reminder before the start of the show. Before the show begins, Lapeña-Bonifacio calls on the puppeteers for them to offer a prayer. The prayer, translated into Filipino, is from a Malaysian shadow puppet play. "This is meant to teach children that the theatre, apart from being an educational and entertaining experience, is also a moral activity," explains Lapeña-Bonifacio (in Velasquez, 1978, p. 40). During the prayer, a puppeteer leads while the rest, together with Lapeña-Bonifacio, repeat what has been said. At the end of the prayer, the puppeteers and Lapeña-Bonifacio bow at the strike of the gong. As the puppeteer

exits, Lapeña-Bonifacio invites everyone to enjoy the show.

The play opens with a song about the world's creation, the animals and plants, and how Jesus came to this world. The creation part is done through shadow puppet projection while Jesus is introduced first as a baby, using a baby Jesus figure, then as a grown man, using a rod puppet.

Afterward, a lame boy narrator enters the stage, happily greeting the audience, saying he needs the crutches and wants them to know that he was once lame. He then narrates the day he saw Jesus and how he was healed. He then introduces each day and scenes within the day to guide the audience.

A sign is then seen with the words DOMINGO DE RAMOS (Palm Sunday). He reads it very slowly, saying "DO MINGO DE RA MOS" as if he is still learning how to read until he is able to say the words correctly. He then tells the audience, "Just stay there. To Jerusalem, to Jerusalem. (A flock of birds enters) Oh, birds. Let's go, birds, to Jerusalem! To Jerusalem..." Then, the townspeople enter happily singing, awaiting Jesus's entry into Jerusalem.

Holy Monday: The boy narrator reads the sign "LU NES SAN TO" and continues to say, "in the temple. The following day, in a church. Did you know, children, that Jesus also gets angry like our fathers? And you know what, his gentle eyes glared because he was very angry." The people turned the church into a market. This makes Jesus very angry, destroying the goods being sold. This incident causes trouble for Jesus. The high priests (particularly Caiaphas and Annas) begin to plot against Jesus, citing him as a dangerous man: someone who can incite a revolution anytime soon.

Holy Tuesday: The boy narrator introduces the day, "Here, MAR TES SAN TO in the temple and Mount of Olives. On this day, Jesus healed me. Many people wanted to get cured. I was lucky that He noticed me even if I was small." As Jesus heals the sick, Magdalene overhears the Pharisees plotting the arrest of Jesus. She

warns Jesus and is afraid that she will not see Him again. Jesus promises Magdalene that if that ever happens, she will be the first to see Him. On the same day, Jesus forewarns His disciples that he will be arrested, mocked, and killed.

Holy Wednesday: The boy narrator reads the sign, "Here, MI ER KO LES SAN TO, It's Mierkoles Santo already! The first scene happens in Bethany, in the house of Mary, and the second scene outside the house of Mary. Kids, here's Judas. Let's see what's his problem. Just stay there!" Judas, one of Jesus's close allies, expresses his confusion through a song. He is beginning to doubt Jesus as a leader. Judas meets the high priests and connives with them by telling them where to find Jesus. He tells the priests that the person he will kiss in Gethsemane's garden is Jesus. Judas then proceeds to Mary's house, looking for Jesus. Mary, Jesus's mother, confronts Jesus, asking Him what the Pharisees want with Him. Jesus explains that this is the plan of His Father and that He is bound to die to save them from their sins. Mary is devastated to hear this from Jesus.

Maundy Thursday: The boy narrator introduces the day, saying, "Here, HU WE BES SAN TO. Huwebes Santo in Gethsemane. Did you know, kids, on this day, Jesus and His Apostles gathered for the Last Supper. I'll leave for now...Last Supper... Last Supper"

Jesus reveals that someone among his chosen ones will betray Him, and someone will deny Him. Jesus names Judas and Peter as the betrayer and the denier, respectively. Judas walks away while Peter insists that he will never deny Jesus. In the next scene, Jesus prays in the garden of Gethsemane. In the prayer, he questions God regarding His destiny to die but later finally accepts that fate because it is "for the betterment of humankind," as stated in the Holy Scriptures. Judas arrives with the Roman guards, and the kiss of betrayal is enacted, leading to Jesus's arrest.

Good Friday to Black Saturday: The boy narrator introduces Good Friday by saying, "Here kids, the most sacred day,

BI ER NES SAN TO, Biernes Santo, will happen in different places: the living room of Caiaphas, then the palace of Pilate, then the palace of King Herod. After the sentence, go on to the road to the mountain and then to Mount Golgotha." Then Jesus is presented to Caiaphas, who, in turn, instigates the people to punish Jesus by death. The trials of Jesus with Pontius Pilate and King Herod happened. In between the trials are Judas's hanging of himself for having betrayed his master and Peter's denial of being one of the disciples when confronted by the soldiers. Jesus is sentenced to die on the cross.

Resurrection day (Easter Sunday): Jesus ascends to heaven. He is first seen by Magdalene, followed by His disciples. Here, the boy narrator joins them, waving goodbye and repeatedly saying, "Goodbye, Jesus! Come back someday!"

To connect the story to the audience, Lapeña-Bonifacio included two children who serve as narrators who introduce each day of the week: Palm Sunday to Resurrection day. They give their own observations about the scene or a character's dilemma. This technique of involving a modern-day child in the story of Jesus instills in the young audiences that anything is possible as long as they believe and have faith in Him.

Since most of the young audiences are from the National Capital Region, the *pasyon* and *sinakulo* are alien cultural traditions to them, especially since these are usually performed in the provinces. *Papet Pasyon* is Lapeña-Bonifacio's way of letting the children experience the form firsthand, albeit in puppet form. Watching the play is an attempt at cultivating or preparing the children as future audiences of the cultural art forms and the theatre. Mann van de Water (2012) explains that these are the necessary goals of any theatre for young audiences.

After the curtain call, the puppeteers and Lapeña-Bonifacio move around the auditorium. The puppeteers engage the audience by letting them experience manipulating the puppets. The puppeteers

give the audience instructions on how the puppet moved on stage and discuss how the puppets were made. Other puppeteers ask the kids which puppets they liked or what they learned from the performance. This also gives the audience the opportunity to take photos with the puppets, puppeteers, and Lapeña-Bonifacio. Some kids would also reach for Lapeña-Bonifacio's hand and press their forehead on her hand. This Philippine custom is known as "*pagmamano*" or "honoring gesture" as a sign of respect or as a request to be blessed by the elder.

MULAT puppeteers were preparing for the staging of *Papet Pasyon* 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic happened. Metro Manila was under Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) from March 14 to April 14. The ECQ status meant restrictions on the movement of people, prohibiting the conduct of face-to-face activities such as classes in schools, performances in theatres, mass gatherings, and many more. MULAT then decided to put together clips from past *Papet Pasyon* performances, footage of rehearsals, and recent interviews with Lapeña-Bonifacio about the show. The final video was live-streamed on April 5, 2020, via MULAT's Facebook Page.

Unfortunately, this was the last *Papet Pasyon* Lapeña-Bonifacio watched because, on December 29, 2020, he passed away at the age of 90.

Awakening through *Papet Pasyon*

Philippine theatre historian Doreen Fernandez implies that Lapeña-Bonifacio's contribution to Philippine theatre is the institutionalization of a localized children's theatre through the Teatrong Mulat. Fernandez notes,

"We also note the great strides taken by children's theatre, especially in the hands of Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio and her puppet theatre Teatrong Mulat, which has gone, along with campus and semiprofessional theatre, into folklore, folk theatre, and other directions. One of her most recent successes was *Papet Pasyon*. Her Philippine/Asian repertoire continues to play

at schools, in small theatres, and in the house she has converted into a children's theatre/museum. Along the way she has developed writers, puppeteers, musicians, and an audience." (Fernandez, 1995, p. 113)

The frustration of not seeing the Passion Play at Oberammergau and the dream of staging the *sinakulo* for children led to Papet Pasyon writing. Lapeña-Bonifacio saw the value of continuing a Filipino cultural tradition and the power of puppets in imparting lessons on the life and suffering of Christ to young audiences.

Puppets have been used in rituals, education, therapy, and puppet theatre (Kroflin, 2012). Aside from the use of puppets in education, puppet theatre forms in Asia are often associated with or are in itself a religious ritual. The traditional repertory of puppet theatre in India and a majority of Southeast Asian countries is based on the Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. These epics teach valuable spiritual and life lessons and that good will always defeat evil (Orr, 1974).

Kröger and Nupponen (2019) examined the potential of puppets in the educational context. Considering Lapeña-Bonifacio's vision of an educational and entertaining theatre for young audiences, let us now examine the impact of the performance of *Papet Pasyon* using Kröger and Nupponen's framework for education, which we mentioned earlier in the introduction.

Generating Communication

The pre-show conversation of Lapeña-Bonifacio with the audience is one way of putting them at ease, especially for first-timers in the theatre and preparing them for the performance. She is introduced as "Lola Amel" (Grandma Amel) to create a familial atmosphere. Aside from having her own grandchildren, this resembles the popular "Lola Basyang," a grandmother who gathers her grandchildren to tell stories meant to teach moral lessons after supper. Lapeña-Bonifacio would ask questions like "Sino na sa inyo ang nakapanood

ng puppet show?" (Who among you have watched a puppet show?) and the audience members would respond.

Lapeña-Bonifacio introduces in the play the narrator, a lame boy who serves as the bridge between the play and the audience. He greets the audience at the start, introduces each day by reading the signboard, describes the following scenes, and sometimes gives a commentary, like a scene in the temple where Jesus knocks down the merchants' tables. The boy even becomes part of the scene where Jesus heals the sick and gets healed himself. The boy narrator makes the audience feel like they are part of the play.

The boy narrator introduces each day by reading the sign aloud. He reads it first by syllables as if learning how to read the words. After figuring it out, he confidently says the day/words. This makes the puppet childlike and may be viewed as a peer by the young audience, especially those who are just learning to read.

Supporting a Positive Classroom Climate

In the case of *Papet Pasyon*, consider the performance space as the equivalent of the classroom where experiential learning transpires.

Lapeña-Bonifacio's use of "Lola Amel" in the pre-performance conversation removes the formalities and establishes a more relaxed environment. This invites the audience to participate in the conversation. The introduction of the lame boy narrator and his role in introducing each scene to the audience prepares them for what to expect from the scenes to follow.

Although *Papet Pasyon* depicts the passion of Jesus Christ as part of the Catholic tradition, the performance is open to the public, whether they are Christians/Catholics, non-Christians, or even non-believers. Aside from introducing Christ's life, welcoming non-Christians or even non-believers to watch the show fosters respect for another person's beliefs.

The positive climate or environment is felt during and after the performance and before the actual performance (i.e., du-

ring rehearsals). MULAT puppeteers say that they are happy every time they join the production. It gives them the opportunity to work together, eat together, and perform while reliving the life of Christ through puppets. Seeing the audience appreciate and enjoy the show gives them joy and fulfillment. In 2019, a total of fourteen (14) puppeteers joined the staging of *Papet Pasyon*--five (5) first timers, four (4) have performed for the second time while five (5) have performed for six or more times already.

Enhancing Creativity

The puppets used in *Papet Pasyon* are rod puppets with no moving eyes or

mouth. The only moving parts are the head, hands (and feet for some puppets). The goal of the puppeteer is to give life to the puppet as it delivers its lines. This challenges the puppeteer's creativity in finding ways to animate the inanimate puppet. On the other hand, the audience uses their creativity and imagination to understand what the puppet is trying to say. They have to listen with their ears and eyes to create meaning from the things that they hear and see onstage. "The puppet may be the product of the imagination of the person who made it, but once created, it exists in its own right" (Ackerman, 2005, p. 26).

Since *Papet Pasyon* is performed every year, the MULAT members find ways to "do something different," like using bamboo instead of cloth to cover panels of the puppet stage or changing some props. Lapeña-Bonifacio is open to new ideas proposed by her young artists. If she believes the idea will work, she gives her full support. In 2018, the group decided to do a new recording of the play, inviting young theatre artists to give voice to the puppets and sing the songs. Regular patrons of the show noticed the difference in the audio and were very happy with the aural experience. Lapeña-Bonifacio was equally happy with the outcome of the recording and congratulated the team who was in charge of the recording.

Fostering Cooperation in and Integration into a Group

The puppeteer gives the puppet life. The puppet “exists through interaction with an audience, and only the imagination of the spectators gives it life. The puppet and audience interact, the puppeteer interacts with the audience, and the puppet and the puppeteer interact. The participation of the audience has an effect on the movement and action of the puppet” (Ackerman, 2005, p. 27). The presence of an audience completes a performance. Their presence and the energy they exude affect the puppeteers’ performance. The interaction between the audience and the puppeteers is made through the puppet. Cooperation is fostered when members of the audience observe proper decorum in the performance venue. They respond to the questions of Lapeña-Bonifacio during the pre-show conversation and the boy narrator during the show.

There was one performance where a group of kids coming from the Palm Sunday mass had their blessed palm leaves with them. While watching the scene of Jesus’ entry to Jerusalem, they started waving their palm leaves into the air in tune with the music. It was a moving sight not only for Lapeña-Bonifacio but also for the puppeteers.

The feeling of community is created after the show when the puppeteers go to the audience area and interact with the members of the audience. Children are curious about how the puppets move and volunteer to hold them. They also ask questions like why Jesus looks different (from the ones seen in the church). A few want to see what is behind the puppet stage.

Behind the scenes, the atmosphere in the theatre is very homey, warm, and nurturing. Lapeña-Bonifacio ensured the puppeteers were provided with snacks/meals after rehearsals and performances. The puppeteers enjoy sharing stories with Lapeña-Bonifacio during meals. The bond created between the puppeteers and Lapeña-Bonifacio is similar to the Asian

practice of master-apprentice.

Changing Attitudes

The writing and staging of *Papet Pasyon* is Lapeña-Bonifacio’s way of letting the youth experience the *sinakulo* and *pasyon* first-hand, albeit in puppet form. Watching the play is an attempt at cultivating or preparing the youth as the future audience of the cultural art forms and of the theatre.

Parents bring their children to watch *Papet Pasyon* because they are curious about how Christ’s passion is being staged using puppets. It is also one way of introducing to the young ones the life and suffering of Christ in a simple manner. Those who really enjoy the show would come back the following year, bringing along a friend or a relative. There are those who watched the show when they were still single, and now that they have a child, they bring their child to the show to share the experience with them. It is interesting how people come and watch the show through word of mouth.

During the meet and greet with the puppets, audience members express appreciation and admiration for how the puppeteers move the puppets. They thought that moving the puppets was easy, but they found it difficult to move when they were given the chance to hold a puppet.

Papet Pasyon has taught its audience cultural traditions and the MULAT puppeteers. Like the cultural tradition practiced by devotees of the *sinakulo*, MULAT puppeteers also engage in a *panata* (vow) to participate in the staging of *Papet Pasyon* as a way of thanksgiving for blessings received or to ask for guidance. If a puppeteer volunteers to participate every year, s/he will likely hold the same puppet/s the following year. More experienced members of the group mentor the younger ones and pass on what they have learned in the previous years.

Through this show, the MULAT puppeteers realize the importance of doing a good show for the audience. They perform not for the sake of performing but

because of the cultural and spiritual value of the whole *Papet Pasyon* experience. The puppeteers see MULAT not as a formal organization but as a family where they treat each other as brothers and sisters and consider Lola Amel as their grandmother. Because of this familial atmosphere, the work in the production is light and enjoyable.

CONCLUSION

No one in the Philippine theatre scene has dedicated her life—as an educator, artist, and mother—to engaging children and the youth in the arts.

From the height of Philippine literature in the 1960s until the 1980s, literary figures focused their writings on the nationalist agenda due to President Marcos's 1972 proclamation of Martial Law and the suppression of human rights. Lapeña-Bonifacio isolated her energy on a different nationalist agenda: creating literature and theatre to awaken young audiences to the beauty and richness of Philippine and Asian cultures.

The staging of the *Papet Pasyon* intended to teach the children and the youth (both the audience members and puppeteers) about Philippine cultural traditions, particularly the *pasyon* (oral tradition), the *sinakulo* (traditional theatre form), promote the Filipino language, and introduce Asian puppet traditions. *Papet Pasyon* is a landmark in Philippine children's theater, or even Philippine drama, because it sows the seeds for a distinctive, synthetic, interdisciplinary puppet tradition in the Philippines.

Lapeña-Bonifacio's exposure at an early age to literature and theatre, the opportunity to learn more about them, and her concern in raising a child exposed to foreign entertainment led her to introduce a new Philippine cultural tradition, a children's *sinakulo* in puppetry, that continues to touch the lives of the young and the old.

Through an intertextual reading of *Papet Pasyon*, the play is a story of hope offered to young audiences who are the

hope of the future. For Lapeña-Bonifacio, art is created as part of life, embedded in one's life. Lola Amel's love and concern for children, passion for writing her own version of the *pasyon*, and desire to create a Filipino puppet were instrumental in awakening the Filipino consciousness of the young and young at heart. Her children, grandchildren, and MULAT puppeteers have vowed to continue this legacy in her honor.

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