

Tricksterism in Plays by Women: Does it Exist?

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The problem that this paper would like to tackle is the presence of tricksterism in plays by women, as exemplified by one young woman playwright, Liza Magtoto.

Before we start, however, let us take note, first of all, that there are not too many plays by women. A quick survey of Filipino drama since the Spanish times will reveal that the writing of plays by women is a relatively new phenomenon. Except for the unestablished claim by a seditious playwright during the early years of American colonization that his wife wrote his plays, none of the moro-moros or zarzuelas was written by women.

When Filipinos did start writing plays in the modern tradition, it was the men who picked up the pen. The entry of women into the playwriting field is therefore a relatively new phenomenon. Among the best-known practitioners in the field are Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio and Marilou Jacob, who have concentrated on the form as well as the practice of dramaturgy. Others, like Magdalena Jalandoni for Hiligaynon and Elsa Cosculluela for Ilonggo, are better known in other fields. Fe Remotigue, who used to write Cebuano plays, has already gone abroad and may not be practicing the craft anymore. Still others, like Virginia Moreno and Estrella Alfon, have written only two or three plays each and are also better known for their other writings. In fact, for most women playwrights, three is the greatest number of plays written.

This is not to say that women have never played a role in Filipino drama. Before the Spaniards came, epic chanters at least in the Panay area were women called *binukot* (or covered up and hidden) because their particular role in the community was to preserve the memory of their race, and they could therefore not be exposed to any influence other than that which was handed down to them from generation to generation (Castro 117-127). In most areas in the Philippines there existed babaylans, mainly old women, who presided over – meaning, led, danced, sang – all community rituals, of which there were a plethora, since these permeated community life from birth to death, from planting to harvesting to eating (Guerrero, Mangahas, Salazar, Jocano, Magos). During the time of the Spaniards up to the present day, women have played major roles in the *duplo* or verbal jousts of Luzon. It seems from these data, however, that women's role in drama was considerably diminished upon the perpetuation of patriarchy by the Spanish colonizers, and then after was confined to the oral tradition and/or in areas or aspects of life that either the colonizer-imposed or naturally-developing patriarchal order could not reach.

The play list of the Philippine Educational Theater Association from the time of its founding, 1967, to the year 2000 is instructive (see Appendix). Of the 332 plays listed as produced in this period, only 35 are by women. Of the 35, seven are co-written by men. Nine of

these 35 are written by Marilou Jacob, while five (since she denies writing one) are by Liza Magtoto. The last of Jacob's plays (co-written with Chris Millado) was performed by PETA in 1994, while Liza Magtoto's first PETA-produced play was performed in 1996. The latter continues to write plays up to now. Other women playwrights who have written two to three plays each as produced by PETA are: Estrella Alfon, Richie Valencia, Joi Barrios, Marina Feleo-Gonzales and Glec Atienza.

Moreover, there is a six-year period, between 1972-1978, as well as a four-year period, between 1982 and 1986, when the theatre group did not perform any plays written by women. Aside from this there are several one-year periods when no women's plays were seen (1981, 1990, 1993, and 1995) and one year, 1999, when one woman's play from the previous year was replayed.

This despite the fact that PETA is known as perhaps the most feminist of all theatre groups in the Philippines. To PETA's credit, of course, we must mention the fact that the 90s did signal a flowering of women's plays, their play list showing more than one production per year of plays written by women, in the years 1994, 1996, 1998 and 2000.

Of the women playwrights featured by PETA, we have chosen Liza Magtoto for this study. Since all, if not most all, of Marilou Jacob's plays are very serious and do not admit of the trickster element, it was natural for us to choose Liza Magtoto as the subject of our study. Choosing her among a group known for its espousal of women's causes as against the degree of espousal of other theatre groups of the same causes (which is nil), we could approximate the relative use of tricksterism by women playwrights, as well as the possible reasons for the relativity of that use.

Tricksterism defined

Before we deal with Liza Magtoto, however, let us first define tricksterism.

Tricksterism as employed in the Philippines must necessarily proceed from its use in the Filipino trickster tales Pilandok, Juan Pusong, Juan Osong or simply Juan, Guatchinango and Bertoldo, as well as such animal tricksters as the monkey and the snail. In these tales, the trickster is a lower class citizen or weaker animal who uses his wits to outdo someone more advantaged than him, with the possibility of wresting the throne of that someone especially if that someone is a king. Note that all the tricksters in the formally labeled trickster tales are male – even the monkey and the snail, as well as other animal tricksters, being assumed to be male.

Trickster tales are differentiated from numskull tales in that the latter are witless, dumb people who get into all sorts of misadventures because of their lack. However, the same Pilandok or Juan Pusong or Bertoldo who displays outstanding wit in some tales may appear to be a numskull in others. Pusongs are never outwitters and numskulls in the same tales, but they may carry the same name in separate tales where they are either smart enough to outsmart kings, or dumb enough to lose their life's savings (Aguilar).

Translated into Filipino drama, the trickster becomes a *posong* character. As defined by Nicanor Tiongson, the *posong* is a "*taong masiste, na nanloloko o naloloko* (trickster or

numskull).” He jokes a lot, and he can be both a trickster and a numskull. In totality, he can be described as:

...1) mababa o mahirap na lalaki, na 2) mabagal, tamad at antukin, 3) mahangin at walang-galang, 4) ignorante at walang huwisyoy, 5) pintasero at matabil ang dila, 6) pilyo at marunong sa buhay, at 7) bastos at malaswa. (Tiongson 1:1)

A lower class *male*, he is slow, lazy and lethargic; boastful and disrespectful; ignorant; nit-picking and loquacious; naughty and street-smart; brusque and uncouth. Unlike the Juan Puso in the trickster tales, however, the *posong* in the *dulang* Tagalog or Tagalog drama is not a major character. Sometimes he may not even be fully integral to the plot. In fact, Tiongson calls him a *salimpusa*, an extra. He, however, delivers the major lessons of the play.

As Tiongson characterizes the *posong* in the komedya: “The audience favorite, he made fun of the komedya’s pomposity by repeating lines of royal characters in mock-heroic tone, by pretending to hit the prince’s head as the prince declaims his lines ever so seriously, by battling enemy soldiers with a short bamboo sword, and most of all, by eating and drinking in the midst of the most sentimental scenes, scratching his crotch, farting and feigning defecation as the king ceremoniously holds court.” (2:35)

In his unpublished manuscript, Tiongson traces the consistent use of the *posong* in the Tagalog drama from the *komedya*, *sinakulo*, *sainete*, prose drama, *sarswela*, *bodabil*, up to the contemporary *dula*. Throughout all of these forms, Tiongson claims, the *posong* represents the poor, weak and uncultured, and therefore carries the point of view of the lower classes of society, his aim being to attack the elite who determine, and often exploit, the nation’s economy.

Through his braggadocio, Tiongson explains, the *posong* points out, exposes, analyzes and assails the airs of the high and mighty who oppress him and those like him with no rights, power, connections or strength. Through his cowardice, he shows that he has no reason for courage, for why should he give his life in a war not his own? Through his loquacity, he is able to talk against all who have oppressed his kind. By talking directly to the audience, he breaks the wall between them, thereby removing the illusion foisted by the colonial master that the ordinary man could become a king or queen of Europe. His dirty language constitutes his quiet rebellion against all laws of high society regarding physical and spiritual cleanliness and social relations, laws that were defined in such books as *Urbana at Feliza* and handed down to him by his “betters.” His constant adoption of women’s clothes shows his reaction to the rigid rules of the establishment, which employs strict dichotomies of gender (Tiongson 1:26-28).

The *posong* spirit, Tiongson adds, is still alive up to now because hierarchies remain (Ibid 30).

If so, then the *posong* should be in plays by women as well.

Liza Magtoto’s plays

Liza Magtoto has written a total of 12 plays, five having been performed in public so far, all by PETA, the theatre group she belongs to. Of these 12, she submitted 10 for this study, omitting her “Informance Play on Philippine Theatre” and “Awit ng Kagitingan,” perhaps

because they do not fit the theme of the present study. Her first play was “Pagsasarili,” which was used for staged reading at the PETA office on May 16, 1991.

Most of the plays deal with women’s right to choose whether to be single or to have babies. “Pagsasarili,” the first play, is done in the conventional theatre style reminiscent of Wilfrido Ma. Guerrero, set in a sala with two doors leading to two presumed bedrooms, one door leading to a presumed toilet, and another door leading to the outside world. It is about two young women trying to be independent from their rich parents, one having discovered that her father was an *Alsa Masa* financier. It is a serious play, done in the hand of one not only young and idealistic, but markedly inexperienced in the craft.

None of the other plays in Magtoto’s repertoire are anything like this first one. In all the others, she is freed, in a rather carefree manner, from the fetters of the conventional theatre with its real-life sets and realistically drawn people. Only in “Kung Pakikingatan N’yo ang Aking Mga Sana” does she revert to seriousness, this time in a lecturing manner; one suspects, even without reading the more cheery first draft, however, that she was forced to deliver the lectures by the NGO that commissioned the play.

In none of the plays does she deal with issues other than women’s rights, more particularly to an unmarried life and/or to freedom of choice in reproduction, except in “Duped sa APEC,” which is about liberalization and was written in English for a Canadian audience, and “Sa Ibabaw ng Tulay,” a short play about someone of whatever gender being stopped from committing suicide by his/her conscience.

Of the ten plays, four are short ones. These are, aside from “Sa Ibabaw ng Tulay”: “Bukas Wala na Silang Asawa,” “Kumpisal,” and “St. Anthony, Pray for Us,” the last being the longest.

In all of her plays except for three (“Pagsasarili,” the final copy of “Kung Pakikingatan...,” and “Bukas Wala na Silang Asawa,”), she uses humor with a naturalése most typical of her work so far. Even in “Kumpisal,” which is relatively the most serious play among the remaining seven, her sense of humor still manages to peek through the curtain of the priest’s confessional.

So are there *posong* characters in her plays? Very few, if any, according to our definition above. Barbs in “Despedida” is a humorous and even comic character, but is she, as defined by Tiongson, even if she be a woman,

...1) mababa o mahirap na 2) mabagal, tamad at antukin, 3) mahangin at walang-galang, 4) ignorante at walang huwisyo, 5) pintasero at matabil ang dila, 6) pilyo at marunong sa buhay, at 7) bastos at malaswa[?]

It would seem not. First of all, she is not a *salimpusa* but the main character in the play. And though she delivers her lines with the utmost humor, we are apt not to laugh at her but at the irony of her statements.

About the only characters that can be vaguely called *posong* in the plays of Liza Magtoto are Ale 1 and Ale 2 in “Libby Manaoag Files” and the Tres Marias in “Tumawag kay Libby Manaoag.” Even then, however, we cannot say that all of the characteristics of the *posong* as

defined by Tiongson are present in these characters. We may say that they serve as comic breaks rather than as *posong* in the full sense of the word, bereft as they are of the full qualities of the *posong*: that is, slow, lazy, lethargic; boastful and disrespectful, ignorant, nit-picking and loquacious, naughty and street-smart, brusque and uncouth.

Moreover, while it is true that such plays as the two Libby Manaoag productions and “Kung Pakikingan...” are replete with what could be called “*salitang malaswa*,” spraying the stage with acts of the same order as Tiongson’s “*paglamon at paglalaklak, ...pagdumi, pagtae at pag-utot*” (Tiongson 1:27), these are enunciated not by one character but are integral to the play itself.

The angel in “St. Anthony, Pray for Us,” while androgynous and could be possibly played by a male in white robes, is too good to be a *posong*; he is a character out to help the hapless Toinette, rather than act as a foil to her.

If there are no *posong* characters in their full sense in the plays of Liza Magtoto, why is it so? For two reasons, she answered when interviewed: first, she was chary of downgrading people, whether they be men or women; second, she felt it would trivialize the subject matter. She could convey humor and lessons as well without making fun of the disadvantages of other people, she said. Her devices, irony and satire aside from humor, are built into the whole fabric of the play rather than into one particular character.

Indeed, Magtoto’s plays, when she is herself and not trying to be serious, are marked by a lightness that is in complete contrast with to the tragic circumstances she portrays, and that carries through her message even more effectively. It is difficult to imagine a full-scale *posong* character intervening in such scenery, especially since her message centers on women’s rights. For the *posong* character is the very essence of the male ego that Magtoto attacks as the oppressor of women. The women she champions are poor, but the men who torment them are in exactly the same straits, and do so because they carry the very habits that characterize a *posong*. If she were to portray them fully, as such, on stage, she would elicit laughter *for* these men, rather than *against* them, and defeat her purpose. If she were to portray those characteristics in a female character, she would make a mockery out of her rather than elicit sympathy for her, and again, defeat her purpose.

Is the lack of a *posong* character in Magtoto’s plays a sign of weakness?

One of the reasons why the *posong* character is necessary in the Tagalog dramas mentioned by Tiongson is that they generally deal with the subject of social classes, portraying and criticizing the movements mainly of the rich and powerful. With such themes, the *posong* fits in perfectly, serving as a foil to the dictations of the strong.

Magtoto’s plays so far, however, deal with social problems not from the vantage point of the rich and powerful, but from the viewpoint of the disadvantaged – or rather, more precisely, from the eyes of the pettybourgeoisie, with their own disadvantages, helping the poor and disadvantaged. Rather than attacking the problem in the usual way – or rather, in the way male Filipino playwrights have done through the centuries – she has reversed the situation, and attacked the problem through the very eyes of those who suffer it to one degree or another.

The *posong*, therefore, is unnecessary to her scheme. If there are weaknesses in Magtoto's plays, they are then not for lack of a *posong*, but perhaps because she has not yet fully matured as an artist. The promise, however, is there, and as long as she keeps to that unbearable lightness of being that most effectively transmits her advocacy of the viewpoint of oppressed and disadvantaged women, she is certain to flower fully into a major playwright – major because she can do what no one else could: that is, portray the social malaise from the point of view of those who in reality bear its heaviest burden, with a lightness in exact contrast to its weight.

While this study has concentrated on the plays of only one female playwright, the lessons derived from it may very well obtain for the others. Is there tricksterism in plays written by women? Perhaps the first question to ask is: why are there so few women playwrights? Why have they written such few plays?

The answer could very well lie in our analysis of Liza Magtoto's works. What subjects have they tried to portray? Have they taken on what men through the centuries have already tackled – the actuations of the rich and powerful, from an omniscient third person point of view – so that they need the grotesque to critique such actuations, and lacking this foil, have to resort to a seriousness even they can't bear? What if they reverse the situation, like Liza Magtoto has done, and start with the point of view of women, particularly of the poor and disadvantaged? Would they not arrive at much fresher insights from there – insights that male playwrights could never come up with for the simple reason that they are neither of the same sex or gender – and gaining such insights, come up with major themes that have never before been tackled, simply because all others have seen the problems of the social order from the omniscience of the male?

Having answered such questions, we could then rephrase our original one, without disparaging a device that has had its use and been used well through some centuries:

Is tricksterism necessary in plays written by women?

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Appendix

Play # in PETA list	Title	Performance Date	Playwright	Director (if a woman)
21	Bayaning Huwad	1967 & 1969	Virginia Moreno	Cecile Guidote
26	Tubig	1968	Estrella Alfon	Cecile Guidote
32	Hello, Soldier	1969	Angela Barrios	
33	Bigas	1969	Estrella Alfon	Cecile Guidote
53	Timbangan ay Tagilid	1970	Marilou Jacob	
55	Mapait na Asukal	1971		Angie Ferro
66	Aidao	1972	Marilou Jacob/ Franklin Osorio	Cecile Guidote
120	Raha Sulayman	1978	Marilou Jacob	Brenda Fajardo
121	Megat Salamat	1978	Marilou Jacob	Brenda Fajardo
122	Sampung mga Daliri	1978	Richie Valencia	Nanette Matilac
123	Juan Tamban	1979	Marilou Jacob	
127	May 1, May 1	1979	Marilou Jacob/ Eman Lacaba/ Al Santos	
132	Mr. Prudente Servicio: Retirado	1980	Aida Carmona	
144	Ang Mahabang Pagdadalawang-Isip sa Maikling Buhay ng isang Petiburgis	1982	Marilou Jacob	Al Santos/ Mary Joan Fajardo
179	June Bride	1986	Ritchie Valencia	Brenda Fajardo
179	Aray Ko!	1986	Glecy Atienza	
184	Juan Tamban	1987	Marilou Jacob	

190	Macli-ing	1988	Marilou Jacob	
193	Pangako ng Binhi	1989	Marina Feleo-Gonzales	
204	Minsa'y Isang Gamu-Gamo	1991	Marina Feleo-Gonzales	
208	Damas de Noche	1992	Joi Barrios	Brenda Fajardo
221	Lutong Bahay	1994	Glecy Atienza/ Teatro Pabrika	
238	Ika ni Rizal – Pepe/ Nazarena/ Kabanata X (IA)	1994	Marilou Jacob/ Chris Millado	
240	Kuatro Kantos	1994	Glecy Atienza/ Teatro Pabrika	
290	Laging Handa	1996 & 1997	Liza Magtoto (authorship denied)	Maribel Legarda
273	Planet Poverty/ Rituals	1996	Raul Alfonso/ Wena Basco	
287	Buhay Lotto	1997	May Lorica	
288	Disierto	1997	Mae Ann Llanza	Lakan Bunyi (male? female?)
289	Despedida de Soltera	1997	Liza Magtoto	Mae Quesada
306	Lakangbini (Las Viajeras/ Oryang/ Lakangbini)	1998	Joi Barrios/ Charley de la Paz/ Alan Panlilio	
311	Informance on Philippine Theater	1998	Liza Magtoto	
313	La Vie en Rose	1998	Ces Millado/ Lea Espallardo	
319 and 323	Tumawag kay Libby Manaoag	1998 & 1999	Liza Magtoto	Maribel Legarda
328	Kumpisal	2000	Liza Magtoto	Emma Rose Quesada
331	Awit ng Kagitingan	2000	Liza Magtoto	