

Theater production as instrument for christian evangelization

[Religion](#), [Christianity](#)



As Willem Dafoe said, “ Great theater is about challenging how we think and encouraging us to fantasize about a world we aspire to.” Theater productions in definition is a work presented to an audience at a particular time and place by live performers who use either themselves or inanimate figures such as puppets as the medium of presentation (Barker, and Beckerman). This type of art has the ability to influence a mass of people through their medium which is stage play. The stories they present may reflect on the organization or writer’s religious beliefs. Therefore, creating an impact on the audience’s mind and creativity.

Philippine theater arts started as rituals even before the years of Spanish colonization. It was being performed and watched by the natives. The priestess or the babaylan was the one playing as the alter ego of the gods.

When the colonizers came to the shores of the Philippine islands in 1521, they saw an instrument for future purposes in the form of rituals which the Spanish chroniclers described with at least three dramatic elements — myth, spectacle and mimesis that they will eventually use in their own material which are comedia such as moro-moro. Comedia became one of the colonizers’ media to influence the pagan tribes of the natives the teachings of Christianity to facilitate their conversion. Moro-moro, and zarzuelas, where battles between Christian Europe and non-Christian people, and the lives of the saint were the most popular themes, are example of comedia that the Spaniards helped popularize.

The first recorded comedia was performed in 1598 during a fiesta in Cebu, using Spanish and Latin as the language. In 1602, to follow their philosophy

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of using the native language as a form of reaching out to the natives, the missionaries brought religious plays into the next level by having it in the vernacular. The first Tagalog play was performed by a group of students from a Jesuit boarding school in Antipolo. In 1609, a *comedy* about the martyrdom of Santa Barbara was performed in native tongue at the stages of Bohol as the Spaniards look forward to natives' Christian conversion. Later on, adaptations such as *corrido* (octosyllabic) and *awit* (dodecasyllabic) of the vernacular, emerged.

When the American colonizers won the Philippines from the hands of Spain, they brought *bodabil* into the acts of Philippine Theater. It yielded a new taste of art, and trend that transformed and merged with the traditional theater. English language was taught and used widely in the Philippine theater which made American popular culture effectively influenced the Filipinos.

Christian evangelization, by definition is preaching the gospel of the Lord to lead people into conversion to Christianity (Webster, M.) During the Spanish colonization, theater was used as a medium or pedagogical tool to teach and spread Christianity to the natives. It still is happening today that even if theater itself was influenced by variety of culture, Christian teachings were still visible in some theater plays in this age.

In 1977, Thomasian alumni Professor Myrna Hilario and Professor Piedad Guinto, along with twenty-five (25) Thomasian students, established the oldest university-wide theater guild in The Pontifical and Royal University of

Santo Tomas, Teatro Tomasino which celebrated its fortieth anniversary last year (2017). Its first ever production was the tragicomedy “ Ang Awit Na Hindi Matapos-tapos” of Orlando Nandres which was, then, directed by today’s multi-awarded director in the film industry, Maryo delos Reyes. Today’s famous personalities such as Piolo Pascual, Arnold “ Egan” Clavio, the late director Wenn V. Deramas and the organization’s former professional adviser, John “ Sweet” Lapus were some of Thomasian alumni that were mentored in and by the guild. Under the umbrella of a Catholic University, Teatro Tomasino had produced several plays that mirrored the Christian traditions and history such as the story of San Lorenzo Ruiz’s martyrdo. Until today, Teatro Tomasino continues to embody the core values of University of Santo Tomas, competence, compassion and commitment in building up talents that will soon bring the pride of the university. Now, several theater organizations, such as Artistang Artlets, help the Thomasian community in honing talents and producing quality plays that exhibit issues, facts, history and various types of themes that is touches the mind, heart, and perceptions of audiences towards reality.