

# W(I)ELDING BRECHT AND *IGAL* IN *THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE*: FROM CONVERSATIONS TO RICH COLLABORATIONS IN DIRECTING AND CHOREOGRAPHY

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## Abstract

This article is a critical/self-reflexive essay that delves into the creative and collaborative processes that a director and a choreographer went through in order to successfully bring into reality the critically-acclaimed *Tanghalang Ateneo* production of Bertolt Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. The article takes the form of a discursive conversation that probes directorial and choreographic concerns in pursuing a work of Philippine theatre. The director is Dr. Ricardo Abad, a sociologist who teaches at the Ateneo de Manila University, and the choreographer is Dr. Matthew Santamaria, a political scientist who teaches at the University of the Philippines Diliman. In their process of artistic collaboration, both artist-scholars expressed, among others, rather "political" concerns. The director emphasized the need to highlight the political nature of the play, its focus on social justice, its innate historicity and its continued relevance to contemporary times. The choreographer stressed the importance of giving due attention to the appropriation of dance as an artefact, borrowed from the peoples of the field and wielded like an artistic weapon in the theatres of cultural centers like Manila. In the end, the production yielded very satisfactory results both in terms of critical recognition as well as theoretical pathways. In the director's mind, the use of *igal* allowed for a "double-alienation effect" that heightened processes of critical thinking among the viewers of the play. To the choreographer, collaboration allowed for the expansion of *igal* as a traditional Philippine dance form into the realm of contemporary theatre vocabulary.

Key words: Bertolt Brecht, *Igal*, Sama-Bajau Dance, Philippine Theater, Choreography, Dramaturgy

## Introduction

This paper attempts to present creative production in theatre as a discursive conversation.<sup>1</sup> The conversation in this case is between a director and a

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<sup>1</sup> A conversation unlike a dialogue aims to explore ideas without having to resolve anything. Unlike a soliloquy, it is not only self-reflexive but is also "other-oriented." The sharing is as important as the expressing. Unlike the homily, except for the assumed notion of reciprocity, it is unstructured and not at all

choreographer, both possessing a high degree of ownership over the shared space of a theatrical production of Bertolt Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* – in Filipino translation, *Ang Litisang Bilog ng Caucasus*. Direction and choreography go through a seemingly infinite state of flux as director and choreographer navigate their way through a realm of symbols, meanings and intent. Rules are non-existent and the routes uncharted as the two practitioners attempt to craft a work of theatre worthy of the name and label of Brecht, consistent with the demands of the traditional genre of the Southern Philippine dance of *igal*, and appealing to the contemporary and relatively young Filipino audience.

This conversation is presented in four parts. Part 1 presents a brief introduction to *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and the two theatre artists' initial thoughts on the material, and their respective concerns and artistic intents of the director. Part 2 introduces specific techniques and strategies that the two adopted or devised in order to achieve the objectives mentioned earlier. Part 3 reviews the results of the collaborative production. Part 4 presents a reflection over possible directions in Philippine theatre and criticism.

## **Part 1: Directorial and Choreographic Concerns**

### **Abad: Brecht and the Filipino Context**

Staging a Brecht play like *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* means addressing two major dramaturgical issues: handling the political theme of the text and conveying the alienation effect necessary to make audiences reflect on the play's political theme. These issues are not easy to resolve. Brecht's plays are now about 70 years old. Their political themes, usually Marxist in substance, may no longer be historically relevant and his original staging techniques, novel at first, may no longer invite critical reflection. Indeed, many leading directors over the past decades have sought with varying degrees of success to reinvent Brecht's dramaturgy in countless ways. Some like Peter Brook have even reconceptualized Brecht's approach to staging (Mitter, 1992). The challenge for contemporary directors in a postmodern age is just as daunting. As Margaret Eddershaw (1996) states in her review of Brechtian performances in Britain over four decades:

Postmodernism presses on us the need for a radical re-thinking of how to perform Brecht...We now need to find ways of

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“pedagogical.” In many senses, it is a liberal airing of ideas that allow for a later possibility of “a million thoughts to contend.”

presenting Brecht that both recognise his historicity and his continued relevance to contemporary culture. (p. 153)

Brecht himself would have approved alterations in staging his work. The German playwright Heiner Müller, said as much in *The Independent* (1993) when he suggested that to produce Brecht without criticizing him was treason. And one way of criticizing Brecht that he himself advocates, continues Eddershaw (1996, p. 153) is to “rework the play texts themselves, so that they can communicate effectively to a changed audience and achieve the intertextuality that is a hallmark of the postmodern, artistic experience”. For non-Europeans, the task of reworking is important considering that *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, as Maria Shevstova (1994, p. 162) observes, reflects a European viewpoint; it is Brecht’s commentary on “post-war settlement and the division of Europe planned for after the defeat of Germany”.

How then do we rework *Caucasian* for a Filipino audience in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century? How do we handle the political theme and the alienation effect?

A look at a Philippine production of Brecht’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* provides some leads. Writing in 1989, Maria Luisa Torres reports at least six versions of the play based on earlier translations and adaptations:

It has a PETA (Philippine Educational Theatre Association) version which was translated in Pilipino and produced in 1977; a community version in Davao, which was adapted in 1980, a Mindanao version, a Cebuano version, a children’s version, a version performed by such groups as Ugnayan, and a Surigao version. (p. 143)

Of interest to me was the Mindanao version, staged in 1985, in Samal, a small island off the province of Davao, south of the Philippines. Torres (1986, pp. 146-149) writes that the production, staged by a community theatre group, addressed a specific Mindanao problem – the land issue – and employed indigenous forms found in the region, specifically the choice of costumes, music, movement, symbols and directing. I have not seen the production, or later versions of it when the play was staged in Manila, but my initial plan was to update a Mindanao version of *Caucasian*, and in light of recurring conflicts in the area to date, expose to Manila student audiences the plight as well as the cultural traditions of a specific Muslim group, the Sama Dilaut, a marginalized ethnic community in Mindanao.

I went to the PETA office to obtain a Filipino translation but found an incomplete set – missing were four scenes. A children’s version of the play was available, an adaptation with the names of place and people changed, but I found it too altered for comfort. I eventually decided to have the play translated

and Ronan Capinding, a colleague in the Ateneo Theatre Arts Program, agreed to do so.

My plan to situate *Caucasian* in Mindanao eventually gave way to a setting that was more abstract and stylized. To localize the play too closely, I felt, was to deal with issues of anthropological authenticity that are very difficult to resolve in theatrical terms. Our production designer, national artist Salvador Bernal, concurred, and together we worked towards creating a “mythical” Asian community.

Our set featured four huge white-painted panels that can be moved around to indicate change of place – be it a mountain slope, the façade and the interior of homes, or parts of a bridge. The costumes, in turn, appropriated motifs from various cultural traditions – Chinese, Muslim and Filipino. The movement style of the play would be similarly appropriated, this time from the *igal* tradition of the Sama Dilaut, a style close to the heart of our choreographer, Matthew Santamaria, who understood very well the burdens of hewing too closely on local performance traditions, especially when done by non-natives.

These appropriations, I feel, are consistent with Brechtian dramaturgy. Brecht sometimes sets his plays in exotic or imagined communities – examples are *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, *Puntilla* and *Mati* – as a way for his audiences to resist identifying with the familiar place and to focus attention on the socio-political issues of his text. In the case of our version of *Caucasian*, the appropriation avoided a direct reference to Mindanao’s land problem, serious as it is, but placed on center stage the more paramount issue of serendipitous justice which lies at the heart of the play. Never mind that the movement is based on *igal*, a Filipino dance tradition. The *igal* still remains alien to urban Filipinos, particularly young urban Filipinos, so much so that the form, especially in its appropriated state, will still serve a “distancing” effect and allow them to focus on the narratives of the Grusha, the simple-minded maid, and Azdak, the scoundrel of a judge.

This notion of “distancing” constitutes the core of the alienation effect that characterizes Brecht’s plays. If traditional western theatre, specifically the theatre of Stanislavksy, seeks to induce in the audience an identification or empathy with stage action or character portrayals, Brechtian theatre seeks strategies to break identification so that audiences can have the occasion to disentangle their feelings and make a critical assessment of the stage action. In practice, alienation entails the dislocation of a spectator’s habitual frame of reference through a critical counterpoint so as to provoke thought. What is obvious is made startling, what is startling is made obvious. It is no more, according to (Holthusen, 1962, p. 1999), than a portrayal of estrangement, i.e. making estrangement ‘striking’. In Brecht’s (1984) words:

The A-effect consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware...from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible into something peculiar, striking and unexpected...Before familiarity can turn into awareness, the familiar must be stripped of its inconspicuousness; we must give up assuming that the object in question needs no explanation. (pp. 143-144)

In acting terms, estrangement or distancing comes about by having the actor present the performance of a role, that is, by externalizing rather than internalizing the action, by showing rather than feeling. The effect, Tatlow (2001) contends, is “to accept the fictionality rather than to connive at concealing it, hence to uncover the internalized forces that would have us believe its fictions are true” (pp.38-39).

Internalization or the subjectivity of the action is thus not denied, it is instead arrived at through externalization. Emotions are conveyed, sometimes dramatically, but are shown in a representational way. “Fiery emotions” are thus made to coexist with “cold control,” passion gets caught in a dialectic (Tatlow, 2001, p. 12).

The *igal*, I thought, would help in the task of representing emotions and distancing the actor from the role. More than this, the *igal* will also introduce a movement vocabulary for the play – and for Philippine theatre as a whole. The *igal*, by tradition, has simply been a dance movement; through this production of *Caucasian*, I hope it can also be a movement style that would enrich theatrical performance.

### **Santamaria: Igal and Choreographic Concerns**

I was overjoyed when director Ricky Abad invited me to do the choreography for Tanghalang Ateneo’s Filipino version of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. I had long wanted to do a full work of theatre using the movement vocabulary of the Southern Philippine *igal* dance tradition and Ricky’s invitation came at a most opportune time. Summer was approaching. I had some free time on hand and had just concluded a research project on the said dance tradition. Needless to say, after saying “wonderful!” to Ricky’s invitation, I still had to play “coy” by saying “let us talk about it”. This started a series of conversations that led to a most unique work of Philippine theatre.

The result could only be unique. Director Abad’s artistic intent was very clear. In line with his goal to articulate the “Philippine” in “Philippine Theatre”, he wanted to use a Philippine tradition as the movement vocabulary for *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. It was quite clear to me that he did not want to “recreate” German productions of Brecht. He wanted to make Brecht his own

thereby making it for the Filipino to approach it and to consume it and therefore understand its myriad themes on justice in Filipino terms. This was a project that opened possibilities, and I had no doubt at that time that this was project where *igal* can shine.

*Igal* is a dance of the peoples of the sea.<sup>2</sup> It is known for its languid movements that evoke gentle waves, the movement of palm fronds or the flight of migratory birds. The dance is performed in rituals of propitiation, rites of passage, social gatherings such as weddings, and most recently in theatrical forms for popular consumption.<sup>3</sup> The dance also appears to possess remnants of *mudra*, hand positions and gestures that may come with specific meanings. *Igal* arguably has the richest movement vocabulary among the traditional dance forms found in the Philippines. For these reasons, I found it to be a most appropriate dance form for theatrical adaptation.<sup>4</sup>

I had several concerns in choreographing which I shared with Director Abad, members of the cast and the artistic staff of the production. First of all, I wanted *igal* to serve as an integrated movement vocabulary not merely as ornamentation. I did not want this production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* to be like the ASEAN COCI/Cultural Center of the Philippines production of *Realizing Rama*, where modern ballet served as the movement anchor that treated the beautiful traditions of Southeast Asia as mere flourishes in an uneven pastiche of linked scenes. Second, I wanted to work towards an evolution of *igal* as a “language” of theatre. I had a work of contemporary theatre in mind and not that of “dance-theatre”, which belongs to an entirely different genre of expression. Third, I wanted to strike a balance between artistic license and the artistic integrity of the *igal*. I wanted the result to be acceptable (or admirable) to the “insider-owners” as well as to “outsider-consumers” of the genre.

In order to mediate these concerns, I had to insist that I had full control over choreography. Director Abad granted me this artistic space during our initial consultations (which I recall happened not once, twice or thrice, but five times). He asked if I would be comfortable working with another choreographer. My answer was a very “un-Asian no! (with an unvoiced thank

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<sup>2</sup> It is also called *angigal*, *ngigal*, *igel* or *ngigel*. The dance tradition is largely associated with the Sama or Sinama-speaking peoples of maritime Southeast Asia. This generic work for dance can also be found in Sumatra, the Malayan Peninsula, Java and Bali.

<sup>3</sup> I use an expanded definition of “theatrical” by going back to the original Greek semiotic of “theatron,” that is, meant to be shown. *Igal* in the field would therefore have ritual, social and theatrical forms. Most recently “parade contest” forms performed as competing entries on boats are found in the Kamahardikaan Festival of Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, Philippines and the Regatta Festival of Semporna, Sabah, Malaysia.

<sup>4</sup> It was only later after choreographing the *Litisang Bilog ng Caucasus*, that I found out that my very own dance guru, Ligaya Fernando-Amilbansa choreographed the Philippine Educational Theatre Association (PETA) version of the same play titled, *Hatol ng Tisa na Bilog sa Caucasus*. A comparative study is planned in the future.

you)” replete with explanatory notes on my work ethic, my creative processes and my sense of territoriality. I also requested a proper period of time to transmit to the student-actors the kinaesthetics of *igal*. This “proper period” came in the form of time allotted for a workshop just before the study of the script and blocking. But then, this had to be extended throughout the whole production period. As I “hovered” behind (and sometimes in front of) the director, my omni-presence (which I hope was more helpful than distracting) must have assured the establishment of a “collaboration” and not of a “commission” in theatre work.

## Part 2: Creative Adaptations

### Abad: Fusing Igal and Brecht

I decided to deploy the *igal* for “Caucasian” when I saw Matthew’s dance class last year perform a series of *igal* movements for the students’ final presentation. I sensed then that the movements had the potential to tell a story in symbolic ways, provide a rhythm to dramatic performance, and convey a sense of the local. Conversations with Matthew affirmed these hunches. And with an added treat. When Matthew said that he saw young people in Sulu do the *igal* to the accompaniment of pop music, I then realized that the *igal* could be easily adaptable to contemporary plays without losing sight of the origins of the dance tradition.

I first thought of using the *igal* sparingly, specifically during chorus or singing moments and perhaps in the critical moments of the play like the trial scene. As it turned out, the *igal* came to dominate the play, and though appropriated from local culture, was closely anchored to the Sama Dilaut tradition. How did this happen?

First, as we rehearsed the play, I began to see that the scenes where the *igal* was used were clearer to behold, and more interesting to watch, and more novel in approach. With perhaps more improvisation on the part of the students, I thought, the *igal* can be used for *all* scenes.

Second, I discovered that scenes where I thought the *igal* could not be used turned out otherwise. With more improvisation and a great deal of imagination, scenes that had Grusha cross a rickety bridge under which was a raging river, or the chase between Azdak and the fugitive, or the resurrection of the supposedly dying Yussup, or the final trial scene could also be rendered in *igal*. Each of these scenes had a choreographic quality.

Third, the *igal* also enabled us to employ local gestures and manners. The way people greeted or bowed to each other, the way the royalty

commanded their inferiors, the way two lovers flirted with each other, the way they said yes or no, among others – all these gave a sense of locality that remained consistent with the overall choreographic style.

All together, and happily so, I was building a movement vocabulary that would pervade the play – a vocabulary that was not pure invention, but one that was anchored in a local dance tradition that deserved more recognition than previously given. The songs, many written as chants and some lullabies, enhanced this vocabulary. So did the live *kulintangan* ensemble of *kulintang*, drums, and gongs that accompanied the singing and punctuated the play's action. Movement and sound, plus the stylized costumes, gave the whole play a strong Asian, specifically Southeast Asian, ambience. Brecht has been appropriated on a Southeast Asian or to some, pan Asian terms.

Even more, the *igal* proved to be an effective device to achieve the alienation effect. Three of these ways can be cited:

First, the use of the *igal* fostered a representational or non-realistic style of acting that is consistent with Brechtian dramaturgy. Actors had to “show” or “externalize” their actions rather than identify with their character in the Stanislavski manner. The fact that most of the actors played double or triple roles (the play has over 40 roles and the cast was half that number) added to the distancing between actor and character.

Second, the *igal* brought urban audiences to a setting and a movement style very much unlike their own. This also allows audiences to distance their identification with place and focus attention on the narrative, argument, and theme.

Third, the *igal* also provided a “metatext” for each scene. Text is the body of words and actions that underscore the narrative of the play. Metatext, in a Brecht play at least, is comprised too of words and action, but this time functions as a device that allows actor and audience to appreciate the text in a new light. Mitter (1992) calls the metatext as “the agent of reorientation” that is equivalent to “a scribble in the margin, a note that breaks the internal consecutiveness in the text and draws attention to it more distinctly” (pp. 45-46).

The songs in Brecht's plays offer one example of metatext. Titles or projections flashed onstage (or in our case the lyrics of the songs printed on tarpaulin sheets and unfurled on stage) offer another. And so does the *igal*. Text allows the narrative to flow, and the *igal* moves, many of them improvised, serve as the metatext to break the naturalness or consecutiveness of the text and in so doing, offer a new and supporting perspective to the moment or situation at hand.

All together, we have made three contributions to a Brechtian production: first, the creation of movement vocabulary appropriate to show a Brechtian narrative; two, the use of the same movement vocabulary to demonstrate the alienation effect essential to Brecht's plays; and three, the globalization of Brecht, in effect to render what is global (a classic western text staged all over the world) also local, a play rich in the signs and symbols of local culture.

### **Santamaria: Theatrical Innovation in Igal**

My creative process in choreography consciously takes into consideration the integration of three spheres of movement. The first sphere refers to ordinary movement such as walking, running, sitting, falling and the like. The execution of these seemingly mundane bits of kineme is as important to the choreography as the execution of decidedly aesthetic movement such as the balletic *battement*, *pirouette* or *assemble* for they are important components of "realism" particularly in mimesis. The second sphere refers to an actor's appropriative expression in *igal* or improvisation within any given dance expression. Many passages in good choreography result from the initiatives or "mistakes" of actor-dancers during the choreographic process. The third sphere refers to deliberately plotted or planned movement passages by the choreographer. I have heard Philippine choreographers such as Julie Borromeo, Douglas Nierras and Agerico Cruz refer to such pieces as "featured pieces" within a certain concert, show or play. As such choreographers are normally given free reign in their interpretation of such sections of the larger work of theatre.

As there are three spheres of movement, in my approach to choreography, there are three modes of creation. The first mode is what I call choreographic dictation. In this mode, almost all movement is determined by the choreographer. Low levels of knowledge of the genre, the inexperience of the dancers and the relative importance of the section or the piece may be cited as reasons for this benevolent form of dictatorship. The second mode is what I call exploratory collaboration. In this mode, the dancer-actors' knowledge of and experience in the dance genre would be high enough to allow some form of dialogue to occur with the choreographer. The dancer-actors propose movement patterns and the choreographer may accept, reject, ask for an alternative, or modify them. The third mode is what I call guided delegation. In this mode, the dancer-actors would have already achieved such high levels of understanding and experience in the dance genre to be trusted with the actual choreography of short or minor passages of the work.

For this production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, as Filipino students tend to be more familiar with Western dance forms such as hip-hop, jazz,

modern and classical ballet than with any of the dance traditions of the Philippines, I had to insist on a *dance workshop* that continued for about two weeks.<sup>5</sup> The workshop was a blessing in disguise for it effectively whittled down the number of the functional cast for the play. Those who did not have interest in *igal* as movement and those who could not cope shipped out.<sup>6</sup> I had to *totally engage* the students in such a manner that I made myself available for movement consultation almost every day up to the very end of the production.<sup>7</sup> This allowed me the luxury of *constant experimentation* in matching my expectations and my vision for the total look of the choreography to their abilities and artistic concerns. And yes, I dictated and felt many moments of resistance which fortunately were rather minor and easily quelled through moral suasion.

As I created within these frameworks of choreography, I was constantly challenged by the need to develop a movement vocabulary from the rich poses and gestures of *igal*. Like in many Southeast Asian forms, the Indian *mudra* and *abhinaya* in *igal* have already lost their meanings. Or perhaps, they were never appropriated as such in the first place. Be that as it may, I still saw the opportunity to devise a language composed of movement vocabulary and syntax via experimentation with the Indian *mudra* and *abhinaya*, as well as other movement semiotics in mind. This process proved to be most enriching and its semiotic imposition surprisingly unproblematic as the students were quicker to learn, to remember and to imbibe the new language than this teacher.<sup>8</sup> A limited set of examples of my experimentation is as follows:

- To call somebody's attention or to command somebody to do something, the performer brings his hands, both *pataka mudra* (palms open fingers with fingers erect and close to each other) above his head in clapping gesture (*sambah*), brings then down around the ears, claps them again just in front of the chest, brings the left hand down to side of the waist forming a fist (*musti*) as the right hand points to the partner in conversation, concluding the passage by placing the right hand on the chest.
- To say "yes," the right hand is positioned just in front of the chest in *pataka mudra*, palm facing the left side. The head is tilted to the right, chin pointing slightly towards the left) and as

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<sup>5</sup> This period may strike many as rather short, but in comparison to many Philippine productions, where most of the time no amount of time is allotted to dance or movement training, this one is rather long.

<sup>6</sup> It is rather interesting to note that from that time on I have acquired the reputation of a "terror" (*Tyrannosaurus terpsichoreanus* var. *santamariae*).

<sup>7</sup> Yes, I even bought them food... that is how important the production was to me.

<sup>8</sup> ...must be the digital revolution. They are so much quicker. I fail in comparison.

it nods forward on an incline, the right hand is made to rotate downward as if echoing its agreement.

- To say “no,” both hands are made to cross each other at the wrist (*pataka swastika*) just in front of the chest and “shaken” with a jerky front-back rotation at the wrist.
- To inquire or to interrogate, both hands in *pataka mudra* are rotated outwards for the palms to face upwards away from the interrogator towards the direction of person being interrogated.

Most of the movements in the *igal* tradition from one pose/position to another often either involve an inward rotation of the palms at the wrist, two inward rotations, one outward followed by an inward rotation, or an outward followed by two inward rotations. Amusingly, the dancer-actors of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* were able to successfully devise variations of these transitional rotation movements with the set poses to express the motives, thoughts and feelings of their characters.

### **Part 3: Happy and Unexpected Results**

#### **Abad: Critical Assessment and Feedback**

The published reviews of the play understood and appreciated our intention to deploy the *igal* to reinforce the play’s narrative. *The Guidon* (2007), the student newspaper of the Loyola Schools, Ateneo de Manila University has this to say:

Incorporated in the play is the Igal, the traditional dance of the Sama Bajau people of the Sitang-kai and Sibutu islands of Tawi-tawi province in Mindanao. The Igal is decidedly utilized as both the estrangement factor and the local facet of this Western comedy.

Along with the production design that is purposely limited to white-washed wooden panels and set furniture, the fitting utility of dance in the repertoire alludes to its defamiliarization from the spectator. This ambiguous approach of the play allows the audience to emotionally disengage, encouraging them to scrutinize the various occurrences of justice in that made-up society, be it truly justifiable or just downright silly. (Buenaventura, Patch, et al. 2007, p. 143)

Still another review, published in the *Business Mirror* (2007, July 27), makes this observation:

Watching that night... I realized how much there is Brecht always in any kind of theatre and how even a group of student actors struggling with the form can convince us about a theatre's engagement with change. Abad's staging of the play, employing the movement evolved by Santamaria out of iganal, the dance tradition of the Sama Bajao, is a raucous enterprise of energy released and collapsing into moments of quiet and speeding again to vaudeville vitality... Onstage, the dance steps were appropriated, copied, memorized, realized and acted out by a troupe discovering ways of expressing anger, joy, sadness. (Valiente, 2007, E. 4)

Some observers were more guarded. An audience member remarked, for example, that the production didn't have the look of a Brecht play. In reply, I can only ask: what is the look of a Brecht play? There is no canonical view. What Brecht and his company, the Berliner Ensemble, did may have been appropriate then but is no longer vital now. Each production must find its own look, shape and coherence. Brecht does not come wrapped in brown paper for recipients to follow. What other Filipino directors do will certainly differ from what Matthew and I did. In any case, the critical question is to ask how directors and their collaborators can engage the audience to reflect on the play's themes and achieve a fresh understanding of the issue at hand.

Have we been successful in that respect? *The Guidon* thinks we were:

Beyond entertaining, *Litisang Bilog ng Caucasus* is able to educate by means of channeling oblique criticality foreshadowed by the actors' frequent nitwitted portrayal of their roles... More than the celebration of different traditions, the play is a contemporary vehicle of showcasing how Filipinos defy the unlawful status quo, outsmart the greedy enemies, and love without a clear grasp of what the future will bring. (Buenaventura, Patch, et al., 2007, p. 13)

Blogs also contain comments on the production. This entry from Ana Serzo, posted August 2, 2007, offers an example:

Isa itong dula na nagbibigay ng kahulugan sa katotohanan at nagdidiin sa pagkapantay pantay ng lahat ng tao. Ipinapakita rin ng *Litisang Bilog ng Caucasus* na ang pagbibigay ng hustisya ay hindi nakasalalay sa katayuan ng isang tao sa lipunan. Nakasalalay ito sa kabutihang loob ng tao para sa kanyang kapwa at sa pagpapahalaga niya sa mga bagay na nakapaligid sa kanya. (Serzo, 2007, para. 1)

*(This is one play that gives value to truth and stresses the equality of human beings. The Caucasian Chalk Circle also shows that the dispensation of justice does not reside in the social standing of a person. Rather it rests on the goodness of a person towards other people and the value that person places on those around him or her.)*

### **Santamaria: Post-production Evaluation and Choreographic Notes**

Seeing the dancer-actors use *igal* vocabulary in many sections of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* as their individual vehicle of self-expression, that is, moving consistently with the movement vocabulary of *igal* without specific instructions from me, indicates in my mind a success in internalizing or making the tradition their own. After the production, another indicator made itself apparent. I heard some students talk about how difficult it was to stop doing the “outward-inward” transitional movements of *igal* as they go about acting in other plays or even in their day to day routine. At that point in time, I thought that indeed over-internalization can occur, and that an “over-zealous” dance master-choreographer armed with a well established movement tradition may be dangerous to one’s artistic career.<sup>9</sup> Happily the students were able to unlearn the “outward-inward” habit and successfully proceeded to other roles.

Sometime in June 2007, a delegation of professors from La Trobe University of Australia came to Ateneo University for an international colloquium and together with some members of our faculty as well as administrators was able to see a preview of the play. The preview, consisting of the last “court and scene” of the play, featured the narrators chanting, *igal*-stylized movements and a finale dance. This was the production’s “test-run” of the play and my very own barometer of success or failure in my *igal* experimentation. Most fortunately, the production seemed to have passed the test. Reception was more than positive. One attendee to this colloquium was so impressed with the *igal* tradition that he has since made arrangements to study it in the Southern Philippines. Another attendee, Dr. Antonette Angeles, Ateneo de Manila University Academic Vice President, told Director Abad that she hope this production would “make Philippine dance ‘cool’ to our students.” Jesuit scholar on Asian Art, Fr. Rene Javellana gave a rave review and even suggested an expansion of the university’s artistic menu by exploring other Asian traditions. “Let us invite Balinese dancers!” he exclaimed.

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<sup>9</sup> This phenomenon, of course, underscores the importance of the “unlearning” or “stripping” process for actors. This psychological pulling away from a role may be seen as a process of “re-individuation,” a successful return to one’s off stage personality allowing for the near *tabula rasa* invention of other roles.

Assessments of the success of the production-cum-experiment became more convincing upon hearing feedback from the “culturati.” Philippine *Business Mirror*’s Tito Valiente writes about three actors who he thought excelled in the production:

The night I watched the play, three outstanding actors walked the stage like it was nobody’s business. Reg de Vera is Grusha, the woman who raised the child and tries to claim it her own is all delicate and consistent. You can say she danced her way to the end. Exzell Macomb as Asdak, the corrupt judge given the task of deciding who the appropriate mother of the child is, is Justice depraved in his long frock. He manages to steal the scenes from everyone with his booming voice that caricatures the monolithic function of justice. Amos Francia, the narrator, links up all the scenes as the Narrator with not a single false move in his body. He tells the proceedings as if he is relishing the anguish and conflicts of those seeking justice. He is almost like our broadcast media sickeningly affecting neutrality even when the scenes demand commitment. He swaggers and twists owning the dance steps, his hands and fingers making worthy the borrowing of this dance form, his eyes glazed as a Balinese dancer. He is a joy to behold – Brechtian or not. They told me – or their performances expressed to me – that in this form the secret is not to stop moving. (Valiente, 2007, p. E4)

Valiente tactfully notes where the production, at least in movement, fails.

Displaying great understanding of traditional forms, Valiente uses *igal* kinaesthetics to produce highly insightful criticism of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* as a work of theatre. The following are Valiente’s observations which this choreographer/dance instructor must remember in productions to come:<sup>10</sup>

Where the production falters is when actors start to relax and worse, to indicate as if he is ‘resting on one leg’. The secret if I am to follow the logic of the form – the *igal* form – is to continue moving using the vocabulary. Where the piece succeeds, it is when the group becomes a band of dancers, only

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<sup>10</sup> At a much later date, Valiente admonished me to criticize his criticism. After much prodding, I relent and in this foot note I write my minor rebuttal. Yes, in *igal* as dance, one is not supposed to stop or to rest, but such kinetic continuity is not possible in long, wordy and wieldy full works of theatre. I however completely understand what he meant by “resting on one leg.” More accurately perhaps it should be worded similarly as follows: Where the production falters is when actors start to rest and worse, when they fall out of character and out of the prescribed postures and transitional gestures of the *igal* tradition. A stop is only a stop when out of the movement vocabulary and out of character.

that each member is assigned a movement because each is playing a distinct role. (Valiente, 2007, p. E4)

#### **Part 4: Creative Explorations and the Specter of Comparisons**

##### **Santamaria: On Igal in Theatre, the Evolution of Distinction and Creation**

In hindsight, I could say that the result of our collaboration in Tanghalang Ateneo's production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is a work of theatre that is both traditional and contemporary, Brechtian and Filipino (or should I say Abadian), and global and local. I believe that this set of "polar" or "spectral" elements contribute to the establishment of tensions in the production that make theatre interesting, consumable and very much alive. Yes, too much tension may make our lives, to borrow from Thomas Hobbes, "nasty, brutish, solitary and short." However, theatre without tension can very well be overly mushy, trivial, ambulatory and boring. Tension must be present, and its presence must be cultivated.

This production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* breaks the discursive hold of the dichotomy between what is traditional and what is contemporary (or the much abused "modern" label). If asked to encapsulate *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in these terms, I would say that it is an articulation of tradition in contemporary terms. By so doing, I also insist that tradition can be contemporary.<sup>11</sup> Nay! It should be contemporary if it is to remain a "living" tradition. Tradition and contemporary-ness are therefore not antitheses of each other. Indeed many so-called dichotomies exist mostly in our minds or playful imagination, perhaps invented for the purpose of conveniently understanding very complex reality. Interestingly, many of my colleagues in theatre note that this collaboration with Director Abad seemed to have produced a "new traditional form of Philippine theatre." I thank them for the implied compliment, but I must be more modest by insisting that it can only be a tradition if followed through with a string of works in the same style through time and through several generations of directors and choreographers. Yes, the traditional elements are there, but they exist in combination with other elements that mediate the needs of contemporary theatre. Director Abad agrees with my off hand observation that the work strangely resembles, although not intentionally, the "Asian theatre opera styles" of the Beijing Opera, Vietnamese Opera and the Basaac Opera. ...a comparison that is interesting... frightening and tensely exciting in its implications.

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<sup>11</sup> This aspect of contemporariness of tradition can be found in the field where Sama Dilaut artists combine *igal* choreography with newly composed music accompanied with synthesizers and not with the more traditional *kulintang* ensemble or with western music composition such as *A Hundred Miles*, or *Diana*.

My mention of the aspect of being “Brechtian and Filipino” is related or perhaps even falls under the aspect of being “global and local.” With the spread of curricula on theatre and world literatures, the increasing tightening and integrating of world media, the internet and other so-called global forces, Brecht has ceased to be solely German. Brecht has become part of world heritage. As with Western classical ballet, many nationalities have put their stamp on it as expression. Indeed what is ballet, without the Italian Enrico Checetti, the Russian Sergei Diaghilev and George Balanchine, the American Martha Graham and many more? The Tanghalang Ateneo production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* may therefore be described as a “trans-national artifact” owned and consumed by not one national entity but jointly by at least two or many more. I therefore find it “moderately disturbing” to hear a comment such as the production not having “the look of Brecht.” It betrays an “other-worldly” view of theatre (indeed, the comment can only come from a person who lives in another world or dimension), a lack of understanding of globalization, globalism and trans-nationalism, and, a generally rigid and overly origin-embedded view of Brecht. But then again, this sort of tension makes (theatre) life interesting.

### **Abad: Contributions and Possible Directions of Philippine Theatre**

What contribution have we made to Brechtian performance? Three things stand out:

First, our production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* has more than localized Brecht, it has also “Asianized” Brecht and made it a multicultural project. Our appropriations of set and costume, as well as the use of *igal*, with its extensive Southeast Asian moorings, have assured us of that multicultural dimension, a theatre of hybridity. At the same time, the use of the Filipino language and the focus on the *igal* dance tradition of Sulu has given the play a strong Filipino flavor, as the student reviewers of *The Guidon* discerned:

Though multi-disciplinary in terms of dominant culture, the play does not fail to mirror an unequivocally Filipino valuing system—what with its indiscriminating humor and its characters’ compassionate compliance with the inescapability of circumstance.

More than the celebration of different traditions, the play is a contemporary vehicle of showcasing how Filipinos defy the unlawful status quo, outsmart the greedy enemies, and love without a clear grasp of what the future will bring (Buenaventura, Patch, et al., 2007, p. 13)

Second, we have also shown how the *igal* can serve as both text and metatext. On the level of text, the *igal* clarifies the play's narrative by giving the spoken lines visual support. But since the *igal* is also a stylized rendering of text, its use serves as another source of metatext, as a tool of distancing the audience from a realistic portrayal of the unfolding drama. In this sense, the boundaries of text and metatext are blurred – a quality, it seems, that characterizes traditional Asian theatre ranging from the Philippine *komedya* to Vietnamese opera. Is Brechtian theatre then an attempt to restore traditional theatre, this time with political themes, in modern dress? Isn't traditional theatre, particularly Asian traditional theatre, Brechtian in spirit? (For a discussion of Brecht's fascination with East Asian theatre, see Tatlow, 2001).

In any case, we have produced what we think is something new in Philippine theatre. It is not so much the fusion, which we have done before, but the introduction of a new form of theatre that gives tradition a contemporary voice. This is perhaps what the critic Tito Valiente meant in his review when he wrote:

In the end, many things are realized by the play. One is the acknowledgment that it is possible to create a form that is not only ours but also one that serves the purpose of the theatre piece for which it is being employed. In this case it is Brechtian theatre. I do not profess to have internalized the notion of "alienation" and "distantiation" that other critics say should attend the viewing of Brecht's plays. This should be a letdown but I have to say that I find the whole idea of reminding the audience that they are watching only a play a bit sophomoric and very '70s. I have to admit, though, that I find the entire mission of seeking new ways to move onstage as not only exciting but amply rewarding. For an anthropologist, I find it enlightening that data from the field site can find their way onto a stage and there challenge our sedated notion of what is dramatic, what is theatrical, what is true. Now isn't that Brechtian enough? (Valiente, 2007, p. E4)

Third, we have also produced a kind of "double alienation" effect. One level of alienation refers to the distancing techniques we have described earlier. The other alienation, more subtle, is the recognition of alienation in one's own cultural tradition. The *igal* is a Filipino dance tradition yet the young, contemporary, and urban Filipinos were not familiar with it and hence were also estranged from their own cultural heritage. If the *igal* awakened the students to the beauty and possibilities of local culture, then our production (and subsequent use of the *igal* for other theatrical projects) will succeed in bridging a cultural gap that has marginalized a Muslim ethnic community in a predominantly Catholic and Christian country. Brecht's play speaks of injustice

done to the poor; the *igal* reminds us of the injustice done to ethnic minorities. Together, Brecht and *igal* constitute a powerful force for championing social justice. In the words of the narrator's closing song in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*:

That what there is shall belong to those who are good for it,  
thus  
The children to the maternal, that they thrive;  
The carriages to good drivers, that they are driven well;  
And the valley to the waterers, that it shall bear fruit.

Let us hope the *igal* bears more fruit as a theatre vocabulary and as a window to appreciate the artistry of people on the margins.

### **Appendix: Synopsis of the Play**

The political theme underlying *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is the arbitrary and compromised nature of justice in a feudal setting – an injustice that has led to the usurpation of land by the rich and the powerful. The opening scene of the play finds representatives of two agricultural collectives in the Caucasian region – one named Rosa Luxemborg, the other Galinsk, arguing over the rightful ownership of a piece of land. The two groups later agree that one collective, the Galinsk, hand over that piece of land to Rosa Luxemborg, the most deserving collective. To celebrate this decision, the Galinsk collective presents an entertainment piece, a show about a simple-minded maid and a scoundrel of a judge named Azdak whose lives intersect in a Solomon-like trial over the possession of a child. The maid Grusha has protected the governor's son from harm during a civil uprising and later finds herself hunted for kidnapping a baby. The judge, in turn, is a political opportunist and a corrupt civil servant. He constantly seeks the favor of the group in power, and once appointed as a judge, solicits bribes from defendants who want decisions in their favor. Both judge and maid meet in a trial where the child's natural mother, the governor's wife, claims possession of the child over Grusha, the child's foster mother. In the trial, Azdak is not moved by arguments made by both sides. He decides instead to have the child stand at the center of a chalk-drawn circle. The mother who succeeds in doing so will have the child. The Solomoic tug of war begins and the governor's wife wins. But the whimsical Azdak defies his own rules and awards the child to Grusha.

Just as the Rosa Luxemborg collective was not the natural owner of the piece of land yet the most deserving group to claim and till it, so too was Grusha not the natural mother yet the most deserving person to keep the child as her own. In Grusha's case, however, justice was achieved not through dialogue, the manner of the collectives, but through great effort and suffering

and eventually via serendipity, through the intercession of a whimsical judge. Here the political theme lies: justice for the poor comes at great risk, immense cost, and high uncertainty.

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