

CARVING OUT A SPACE
FOR CONTEMPORARY DANCE IN THE SOUTH
Agnes Locsin's Continuing Legacy¹

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Abstract

This essay follows the trajectory of Locsin's choreographies as an artist initially based at the "center" of the arts in the Philippines, and later as an artist who decides to return to her home town in the South. One sees in the neo-ethnic and urbanative choreographies of Locsin how dance articulates the connections between milieu, motivations, and materials. While her neo-ethnic works resonate themes of nature, rituals, Asian arts, ethnic dances, and history, her urbanative choreographies are closer readings of what afflicts the Filipino of today, in particular the urban Filipino. Both the neo-ethnic and urbanative paths are proofs of Locsin's probing artistry; the two are not separate and distinct but intertwined paths. This essay likewise discusses various issues such as "cultural ownership" and "authenticity" which have surrounded the works of Locsin over the years. Ultimately, her choreographies point out to how dance is not only a language in which we write and re-write the past but is also an eloquent expression of the present.

Artists become veteran artists only by making peace not just with themselves but with a huge range of issues. You have to find your work all over again all the time, and to that you have to give yourself maneuvering room on many fronts—mental, physical, temporal. Experience consists of being able to reoccupy useful spaces easily, instantly.

David Bayles and Ted Orland, Art and Fear: Observations on the perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking

One cannot write about the former artistic director of Ballet Philippines II (1989-1990) and later of Ballet Philippines itself (1994-

1996), without delving into perhaps her most lasting contribution to Philippine dance—"neo-ethnic" choreography. Among all the choreographers I write about and mention in my research (i.e., Myra Beltran, Herbert Alvarez, Angel Lawengko-Baguilat, Ava Villanueva, Avel Bautista, Dwight Rodrigazo, and Noel Garrovillo), Agnes Locsin has the longest affiliation with the Cultural Center of the Philippines. The other choreographers and dancers were, at one point of their careers, part of Ballet Philippines, either as scholars, dancers, guest performers or participants in the company's workshops.

Locsin's career as faculty and artistic director of Ballet Philippines stretched for a total of fourteen years, after which she decided in 1999 to move on to another phase of her life—returning to and creating works for the arguably oldest dance studio in Davao, her Mommy Carmen's Locsin Dance Workshop, founded in 1947.²

And because Locsin has been one of the towering figures in modern dance in the Philippines³—together with Alice Reyes, Edna Vida, Denisa Reyes—she and her works have been featured in essays, reviews, and articles in the past decades. But Locsin's relentless creative efforts and vision for dance—the latter, she humorously denies having—continue to make her a strong presence in Philippine dance. Choreographing in the South, she not only continues to mount shows that are critically acclaimed, both in Davao and Manila, but has likewise worked with other choreographers in her hometown as part of her efforts to widen choreographic vocabularies.

If one is interested in looking at how dance is deeply enmeshed in the narrative of the Philippine nation, Locsin's works would be a rich collection of choreographies to discuss. A listing of her creations reveals re-tellings of various cultural and historical aspects of the nation: *Igorot* (1988), *Ismagol* (1990), *Bagobo* (1990), *Kulam* (1991), *Moslem* (1991), and *Moriones* (1991), *Hinilawod* (1992), *Encantada* (1992), *Babaylan* (1993), *Elias* (1995), *Ang Pagpatay kay Antonio Luna* (2002). As expected, the more a work is entangled with history and culture, the more it becomes exposed to various assessments on matters of "authenticity," "fetishism," "orientalism," exoticism, and a whole slew of various ISMs, all of which move around the realm of the "politically correct." And Locsin's choreographies have not been spared from censure.

One of Locsin's works that have been the subject of scathing reviews is *Igorot* (1988).⁴ To this and her other works have been attached the following caustic labels: "bastardization," "exploitative," "neo-primitive" and "cultural mining" (Locsin forthcoming, n.p.). Although

she is not unaffected by critical assessments, she has been dispassionate about this, aware of the risks one takes in creating dances with materials derived from the cultural practices of our country's ethnolinguistic groups. Indeed, coming from a landed family in Bacolod who later moved to Davao, Locsin's subject position will always be susceptible to criticism. What, for example, symbolic investment does a Christian, landed woman, educated in exclusive schools in the Philippines, with an MA in Dance from the Ohio State University have when she creates works based on the movements of the "tribal" communities in the northern and southern Philippines? What cultural appropriations and transformations are made in such choreographies? What incursions into the narrative of the Philippine nation are effected by these choreographies?

These questions and issues are no longer new as they were the same questions raised by scholars and choreographers as regards the folk dances staged by performing companies from the 1930s to the 1980s. In his book *The Day the Dancers Stayed* (2010), Theodore Gonzalves re-visits the works of Francisca Reyes Aquino (National Artist for Dance, 1973), Helena Benitez, Jose Lardizabal, Lucrecia Urtula, and Isabel Santos, and situates them within a particular historical juncture to show the entanglement of the narrative of the nation with that of folk dance. Gonzalves analyzes the full support given by UP president Jorge Bocobo (1934-1939) to the efforts of the founding scholar of folk dance, Reyes Aquino, as part of the University's enterprise to prove the Philippines' ability to stand proudly beside other nations. Bocobo decried the onslaught of Americanization because imported dances, songs, movies, and literature were chipping away at the Filipino identity (40). Believing that the younger generation had to learn how to "perform their specific repertoire" with confidence and that a sense of nationalism had to be "internalized viscerally but exhibited kinetically" (Gonzalves 2010, 39), Bocobo recognized the crucial role Aquino would play in his plans. Aquino's academic career was fostered by Bocobo's administration—from her trips to the barrios in order to research on the folk dances to the writing of her M.A. thesis on Philippine folk dances and games in 1926. Gonzalves makes a significant observation of the 1930s as the decade when curricular changes during the American occupation saw the emergence of folk dances as a crucial component of the PE program conceptualized by American teachers. Folk dances, thus, became "part of playground demonstrations, athletic meets, and schoolwide events" (47). In line with Bocobo's vision, Aquino's teaching of folk dance—the UP Folk Song and Dance Club (the group was reorganized as the Filipiniana Dance Troupe after World War II and was supported by the US military—was a means of "foster[ing] patriotism and nationalism"

and “demonstrat[ing] the growth of Filipino culture through the evolution of Philippine dances” (47).

Gonzalves considers Bocobo and Aquino the “patrician children of the Ilustrado class [who, as]... inheritors of the elite liberal tradition [,] attempted to resolve the ‘incomplete’ revolutions of the 19th century” (61). Inspired by the romantic strain of nationalism, Bocobo and Aquino created a dance repertoire for the emerging independent Philippine nation.

Their invention of a tradition was precisely what survived so many generations later as a repertoire that appeared to be anything but invented—timeless, unchanging, and authentically delivered from the past... Instead of dances and music emerging from a mystified primordial history, the national performance repertoire was bribed and cajoled into existence by anxious educators, nervous nationalists, and ambitious political sponsors (Gonzalves 2010, 61).

Similarly spurred by a nationalist sentiment and by the conviction that dance is integral to the nationalist project, the Bayanihan Dance Group founded by the president of the Philippine Women’s University (PWU), Helena Benitez, became popular for its performances of Philippine folk dances. It was sent abroad by President Magsaysay to represent the nation’s vibrant culture, and earned praises for its “iconic dance,” the *tinikling*. Consequently, the Bayanihan was declared the Official Cultural Mission of the Philippines—not without much protest from other dance groups—to the United States and Europe. Jose Lardizabal, its director observed the political and historical temperament of the Filipino nationalists after the war and declared that

It was inevitable that after the Philippines proclaimed independence..., nationalist sentiments that had been momentarily lulled should be fanned afresh... for discerning Filipinos, it was time to go back to their roots, reassert national identity (Gonzalves 2010, 73).

Although Lucrecia Urtula (or “Mommy Urtula” to most of the dancers and choreographers), PWU’s PE teacher who took charge of organizing a program that promoted folk dance aggressively, followed three “aesthetic dimensions” (i.e., compression, enhancement, and highlighting) in adapting the folk arts and in “retain[ing] all those elements of the original material without which the authenticity of the new material would have diminished” (Gonzalves 2010, 75), the Bayanihan’s renderings

of folk dances did not escape critical assessment. In effect, the company “invented traditions” and in the process of forwarding a national identity, presented the “‘folk’ by edit[ing] ritual into palatable entertainment forms built for export” (Gonzalves 2010, 73). Reynaldo Alejandro, a scholar on Philippine dance based in the United States describes the Bayanihan’s choreographies as “stylistically staged revue dancing” which ultimately renders a picture of the Filipino people as “eternally happy, carefree, childishly irresponsible, ignoring all sense of the hundred of years of social struggle” (Gonzalves 2010, 83). Even Reyes-Aquino, three decades after she mounted her productions, expressed dismay at those who “stylized the national repertoire behind her ability to recognize it” (Gonzalves 2010, 48).

The discussion on the vexatious issue of staged “folk dance” illustrates the inevitable problematic involvement of dance with the nation, predictably when the former is made to carry the weight of representing the latter. The soldering of dance and the nation will always be a temptuous relationship particularly when choreographies are declared part of a nationalist agenda.

The critical assessments that surrounded the productions of the Bayanihan resonate in critiques of choreographies informed by movements derived from the ethnolinguistic groups in the Philippines. The “folk,” the “ethnic,” and the “tribal” are tightly guarded terms protected from those who are not folk, ethnic, or tribal; they are shielded from choreographers like Locsin. Hence, the reaction towards some of her choreographies, particularly the *Igorot*.

But the *Igorot* featuring classical pointework of the ballet tradition had a long history of gestation. The idea began when she was exposed by her sister, Bing, to the Bayanihan dance troupe. Locsin had wanted to join the group primarily because she idolized her sister who was her teacher in folkdance, jazz, tap, and aerobics. In high school, Locsin danced the *Igorot* choreographed by her sister for a folk dance competition and even when she was already in college, her fascination for the dance became stronger when she watched an Igorot piece win in a folk dance competition. Remembering the choreography’s use of unison, she then decided to create her own version for her dance group and entered the piece in another competition (Locsin, e-mail to author, July 22, 2011).

If Locsin saw the choreographic possibilities (i.e., its precision and technical demands) of an *Igorot* piece, her classmates and teacher in a compositional studies class at the Ohio State University were stunned and speechless upon watching her use its dance vocabulary. Realizing that it

was only by being a Filipino and drawing from her cultural matrix that she would excel, Locsin continued to mull over *Igorot* and used it as the topic of a paper she submitted in one of her classes. At that time, she had already wanted to create a modern choreography which later motivated her to go to Bontoc and research on the movements of the tribes in the Northern Philippines. Strong as her desire and vision may have been, the choreography was just not ready.

With concepts and ideas already brewing in her mind, she finally choreographed the work for the Le Petite Theatre Amsterdam in 1987, the year she was in Europe to further her knowledge on modern dance techniques (Corpus 2007, 106). The Amsterdam experience further strengthened her belief that as a Filipina choreographer and dancer, she could only create works that would make her distinct and different from the “white dancers.” Hence, her decision to “go Filipino” and to create a dance based on the fieldwork she had done in the Northern Philippines in 1983.⁵ In the 80s, Filipino dance music was not quite visible in stores so Locsin had to request her mother to send her Bayanihan cassette tapes and these provided the much needed accompaniment for her choreographies (Locsin, e-mail to author, July 22, 2011).⁶ Using the grammar of modern dance,⁷ Locsin created a dance whose movement phrase was inspired by the dances in the North and the dance genre she chose was ideal as it “emerged out of this international interaction between folk, national, and global cultures” (Turner and Yangwen 2009, 13). For her project, modern dance had a useful vocabulary.

In her essay “Originality in the Postcolony: Choreographing the Neoethnic Body of Philippine Ballet,” (1997) Filipino dance anthropologist Sally Ness places dance in a global context and looks at *Igorot* with a critical angle. Considering the piece a “Philippine transnational ballet,” Ness rejects a simplistic treatment of appropriation as “cultural imperialism” and shows how the choreography chooses and combines elements from both ethnic and ballet styles. Neither Western nor Filipino, the hybrid dance embodies a number of contradictions. Although Ness acknowledges that *Igorot* is a “decolonizing’ dance” whose choreography is an articulation of a kind of Philippines, she likewise problematizes how the piece tends to conflate the identity of the Igorot with all the Filipinos. Such conflation, in effect, does not only gloss over the multiple ethnic identities in the Philippines, but also ignore the power relations operating in the nation state (Reed 1998, 514).

In the “Postscript” of her forthcoming book entitled *My Neo-Ethnic Choreography: A Creative Process*, Locsin recounts how she took comfort

in the words of a woman from Bontoc she interviewed in 1983 while doing her fieldwork. When Locsin asked the woman if she took offense at her choreography, the latter assured her that she was not bothered at all because Locsin's dance never claimed to represent the "real" Igorot dance.⁸ No claim to authenticity was made. What was offensive to the woman were dancers who performed and claimed—perhaps implicitly—that they were Igorot, Bagobo, or Mandaya even if they were not. Locsin was relieved: "Her statement gave me encouragement and absolution as I have never claimed that my works were the 'real thing'" (Locsin forthcoming, n.p.).

Locsin's title, "Igorot," was a deliberate choice. Because of her limited knowledge of specific movements of each of the several northern ethnolinguistic groups (i.e., Bontoc, Ifugao, Benguet, and Kalinga Apayao),⁹ she decided to use the collective name "Igorot." Although it was a practical choice for her, this decision could be read as a choreographic call that furthers the homogenization of distinct and complex cultures. Nonetheless, Locsin's clear agenda must be considered.

Mrs. Francisca Reyes depicted tribal and folk dances *per se*, meaning whatever she saw, she taught exactly. I create new movements. I just get inspiration from the tribal dances that I see or research on. As far as I know, I have my original steps. I know for a fact that I created the steps and did not lift them from anywhere else. But of course you cannot claim originality on anything because it is not strange for somebody to come up with probably similar steps from another place. That happens, but the compositions, the putting together, the embellishing of the movements are all mine (Dakudao "The Irrepressible," W1-W2).

"Cultural ownership," as Locsin implies will always be a problem. The very idea of ownership or authenticity has even been contested. Dance historian, critic, and teacher Roger Copeland comments that "everything is an authentic version of something, as in, 'It's not fake anything, it's real plastic.' Indeed, the only form of inauthenticity that many contemporary anthropologists will acknowledge is a nostalgia for the 'purity' of the past authenticity" (27).

In choreographing her neo-ethnic pieces, she combines the old and the new and follows a logic in movement. As each step is characterized by an 'energy flow,' it leads to a next one, eventually creating phrases of movements that are logically connected (Locsin forthcoming, n.p.). In extending, elongating and creating variation movements, she does not lose sight of the source material or the "point of origin," lest her re-creations become a mishmash of movements without integrity. The use of Western

staging techniques to expand the possibilities of the ethnic movement likewise challenges the aesthetics of modern dance, both thus informing each other and thus contributing to the narratives of dance, and in most of Locsin's choreographies, those of the nation. For her, "the creation of a new work, though ethnic inspired, is simply a creation. It is the choreographer's responsibility to distinguish between ethnic and neo-ethnic (i.e., a "new" or current creation). And since hers is neo-ethnic, it is intended to be an artwork paying tribute to the source of origin (Locsin forthcoming, n.p.). It is crucial to bear in mind Copeland's¹⁰ basic question in dealing with choreographies that combine the old and the new or different movements from different cultures: "How do we distinguish between exciting new forms and mere corruptions of existing forms?" (1993, 27).

Musician Joey Ayala who suggested the term "neo-ethnic" (a translation of his "bagong lumad") to Locsin when she was looking for a term that fits her creations, explains how he coined the word. "Neo-ethnic" was the term that described what they were doing in the musical *Sinalimba* and the catch-all word meant a fusion of the contemporary with elements of local cultures. *Sinalimba* was "new and flamboyantly colorful in an ethno-linguistic way" – it was a musical that combined rock music and trance gongs (Locsin forthcoming, n.p.). As a descriptive term that seems to have become a noun (i.e., that is, a kind of dance genre), "neo-ethnic" allows the re-telling of the nation's history and culture. Ayala's elaboration on what their works embodied is significant in looking at dance and history: "in all that we do, we crystallize past, present, and future," the "neo-ethnic freeze-frame occurs at the point where 'contemporary' global-urban-westernized-market economy art and artists meet their 'traditional' counterparts—arts and artists from clearly-rooted local cultures" (Ibid).

In Locsin's neo-ethnic dance, therefore, we find the encounter of movement— of modern and ethnic dance—and history. And because the choreography is current and embeds the movements derived from tribal communities in the grammar of modern dance, the creation is actually a contemporary narrative of some aspect of our national history. This becomes more pronounced in a work like *La Revolucion Filipina*, first staged in 1996 (performed several times in the Philippines and in the United States until 1998) and then re-staged in 2008. With the music of Ryan Cayabyab and libretto by Dennis Marasigan, the work encompasses Philippine history from the 16th century to the beginning of the Philippine revolution against Spain. *La Revolution* was an opportunity for Locsin to "re-live the Philippine revolution," in her own terms as she decided to meld the movements in her earlier works to explore the issues surrounding the ideological difference between Apolinario Mabini, Emilio Aguinaldo, and

Andres Bonifacio (“Revolution Redux”).

The 90s was the decade of neo-ethnic for Locsin, for her immersion in ethnic dances and her creation of new modern dances out of her materials. It was a decade of re-narrating and dancing stories, mostly of the nation’s past. The decade after, Locsin had another discovery: the “urban Filipino.”

The term “urbanative,” may be as controversial as “neo-ethnic” for those who insist on conflating the “ethnic” (and corollarily, the “native”), a “cultural reference” (i.e., linguistic and religious) “with the biological concepts of “blood and race.” Anthropologist F. Landa Jocano, however, points out that we have yet to find a solid study showing scientific evidence that we could be classified into specific races. No extensive study has been done “for the purpose of establishing certain criteria for determining the racial classification of the population in the archipelago” (Jocano in Nono 2008, 158). Ethnicity therefore, should not be thought of as exclusive to specific groups in the Philippines. Looking at Locsin’s and Ayala’s “urbanative,” we could say that the 21st century urban Filipino could be ethnic too because “ethnicity” is

“...culture, tradition, language, social patterns and ancestry, rather than the discredited generalization of race with its assumption of a humanity divided into fixed, genetically determined biological types... Ethnicity and its components are relative to time and place, and like any social phenomenon are dynamic and prone to change...” (Ashcroft and Griffiths, and Tiffin 80-83, quoted in Nono 2008, 158).

The urbanative collection saw the choreographies in *Four Last Songs* (1999), *Dance and Poetry* (2002), *Meri Krismas* (2002), *Toccata* (2001) *Sayaw Atbp.* (2001) *Bayle Dabaw* (2002), *Sayaw LikhANG KIUKOK* (2003, 2005), *URBANATIVES* (2003), *Ibat Ibang Sayaw* (2006), *Ibang Klaseng Pag-Ibig* (2006), *Legacy of Dance* (2007), *A Love Story* (2007), *Stereowoman* (2007), and finally, *Sayaw, Sabel* (2010) which, though less controversial than her neo-ethnic choreographies of the 90s, nonetheless resonate the pulse of urban living.¹¹ In *Sayaw, Sabel*, she is strongly inspired by painters Ang Kiukok and Benedicto Cabrera (more popularly known as “Bencab”). Locsin explains that visual artists seem to have a connection with her because she “see[s] stills... [and] make paintings move.” She vividly and amusingly describes what she does when she is inspired by paintings to choreograph: “gina pa giho ko sila” (I make them turn/move).

In the choreography based on the works of cubist painter Ang Kiukok (National Artist for the Visual Arts, 1971), Locsin expands an earlier thirty-second work which she created as a commissioned work by the National Commission on Culture and the Arts for a tribute they gave to eleven national artists for the visual arts in 2001. Transformed into a full-length work, *Sayaw Likha* bears the trademark of Locsin—earthbound, powerful and solid, movements—complementing the edgy dissonant sounds of Ayala. Both movement and music successfully work to surface the emotions articulated in Kiukok’s cubist paintings: a sense of subterranean desperation in urban lives. Revolving around the theme of entrapment, the seductively fierce savagery characterizing the movements provide the dark undertow of the entire work—that gripping, even suffocating sensation of entanglement and an inability to escape from one’s circumstances—those of lovers and people in various uncertain relationships. It is a sensation that we often associate with the brutal realities of city life, with the travails of the urban Pinoy. Locsin’s eye for movement and paintings capture what poet Arlene Ang refers to as the “Lowelian theme” in Kiukok’s works: “I hear my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell, as if my hand were at its throat... I myself am hell...” (Ang, “The Cynic”).

Locsin goes deeper into the psyche in her *Sayaw, Sabel*, moved by Bencab’s “Sabel,” a recurring subject of his sketches which he began when he took a photograph of a scavenger in 1965. In Locsin’s words, “For Bencab, Sabel is a melancholic symbol of dislocation, despair and isolation, the personification of human dignity threatened by life’s vicissitudes, and the vast inequities of Philippine society.” Transformed in the choreography of Locsin, Sabel becomes Jose Rizal’s Sisa, who for Locsin “represent[s] an image of the country’s continuous and seemingly endless struggle to survive (‘Agnes Locsin, Inspired by Bencab, Tackles Pinoy Psyche’).

The titles of the dances (i.e., “Abandonada,” “Sugatan,” “Sino Ka?” “Bagong Bayani,” “Balo,” “Batak,” “Nasaan Ako,” “Kayod,” “Ako Una,” “Dalawahan,” “Mahal,” and “Ano Ako?”) that comprise the entire work reveal the different forms of disturbances that haunt our minds. From those related to love—of gaining and losing a loved one—to those resulting from extreme hard work amidst life’s uncertainties, to obsession and fanaticism, to drug addiction, to those brought about by traumatic experiences in the war-torn Southern Philippines and hard work abroad, and to outright mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and alzheimers. This range of neurosis and psychosis is so familiar to the Filipino of the 21st century. Rizal’s Sisa remains a moving figure because residing in each of us, is a fragment/aspect of her insanity. Centuries after Rizal’s *Noli Me Tangere* was published, the Filipino finds himself mentally disturbed by

social ills.

Her post neo-ethnic choreographies, though lesser in scale in terms of their narratives—they are no longer “historical” and “cultural” in the traditional sense—are nonetheless closer readings of what afflicts the Filipino of today, in particular the urban Filipino. But perhaps using the term “post neo-ethnic” is even problematic as the term assumes a clean and clear leaving behind of a kind of choreography, which did not seem to happen in Locsin’s case. Asked when the shift actually happened, Locsin starts recalling that tipping point, that moment when she decided to develop a new vocabulary. Like most artists who are not wont to document (i.e., in writing) their own histories as their works should be taken as histories themselves, Locsin attempts to piece things together, to make connections between milieu, motivations, materials that gave birth to urbanative works. And in her story of how this new form came to be, we see how “art is projected through the clarity of its form,” and how “form is the shape of a content” (Holm in Brown 1979, 78).

The earliest urbanative choreography that comes to Locsin’s mind is *Four Last Songs* (1999) which she created as a tribute to the former CCP President, Ma. Theresa Escoda Roxas whom she affectionately called “Tita Bing.” It was actually Locsin who volunteered to choreograph the piece whose music was Richard Strauss’ “Four Last Songs,” Roxas’ favorite. In that year, it was not just the death of the CCP president that deeply moved Locsin; she was still recovering from the death of her father the previous year. With so much grief, Locsin had to find another vocabulary for her choreographies as the neo-ethnic movements did not sit well with the pieces she had in mind. This is not to say that her new works were devoid of neo-ethnic tendencies as she “purposely distorted them [neo-ethnic movements] and came up with new movements which [she] believed expressed how [she] felt at that time (Locsin, e-mail to author July 24, 2011). Her former student and now professional dancer, Georgette Sanchez, remembers having had more “freedom to distort more and use [her] body. But the use of the center, control and strength of the legs were there... [these] qualities [which marked Locsin’s neo-ethnic pieces] were always present.” Sanchez also noticed that though the pieces were still “technically hard and challenging,” they were created around what the dancers’ bodies could do (Sanchez, e-mail to Locsin, July 26, 2011). Feeling elated at the results of her “distortions,” Locsin continued to create similar pieces when she returned to Davao.

There seems to be a pattern in the naming of Locsin’s signature dance vocabularies (in literature, these would probably be equivalent to

sub-genres). Her creations precede the labels which eventually become trademarks—the audience knows when a piece is a Locsin neo-ethnic or urbanative. As with the label “neo-ethnic,” the term “urbanative” came a bit after she had already begun re-working her neo-ethnic movements. She explains that it was Joey Ayala who once more provided her with a provocative term—“urbanatives.” Their collaborative work—with Ayala and Nonon Padilla—for Ballet Manila in 2003 carried the same title. She thought that the result of using modern day situations in interpreting ethnic rituals was not only “fascinating.” It was for her, the beginning of a clearer trajectory for her new project: the discovery of urbanative movement (Locsin forthcoming, n.p.). Thus, Ballet Manila’s *URBANATIVES*, an episodic choreography moving around urban life realities but with themes drawing from tribal dances of prayer, work, love, and war, perfectly embodied what she was doing in Davao. This was four years after *Four Last Songs*. Although her works in Davao revolved around contemporary issues, the Ballet Manila choreography which she considers modern and perhaps even neo-classical, was still characterized by movements reminiscent of tribal rituals and ethnic dances. It was in response to an interview question that asked her to label her post-1990s works that Locsin uttered “urbanative.” The term, as she recalls that interview, “sounded good” (Locsin, e-mail to author, July 24, 2011).

Looking back at her 1990s choreographies, Locsin explains that the neo-ethnic vocabulary just was not successful in articulating both the current events of that decade and the concepts she was working on (Locsin, e-mail to author, July 24, 2011). The shift, or should we say “swing,” as Locsin still continued to create neo-ethnic works in between—*Sayaw sa Pamlang* (2000), *Senses* (2000), *Ritwal* (2003), *Agila* (2003), *Sayaw Pandirigma* (2005), *Balyan*, *Sayaw sa Labi* (2006) *Sayaw sa Karagatan* (2006), *Pitong Alay* (2006)—may be read as part of the continuous quest of an artist for “identity.” Not that such identity was missing, because to begin with, she had found it her neo-ethnic. “Identity” in this sense, refers to a form or medium that an artist perpetually problematizes in response to his/her changing realities, national or otherwise. In the late 1990s, it was “urbanative” that served as her chosen vocabulary to deal with a particular milieu, a milieu that she and her “aging bones” had to dialogue with. A little bit less energetic in that decade, Locsin could not engage in intense research and spend time in far flung areas of the Philippines. The immersion days of her neo-ethnic years had to be given up. In her words, “I felt it was time to slow down on neo-ethnic works since I was unable to do new things with it. I hate repeating myself” (Locsin, e-mail to author July 24, 2011). In her remark, we get a glimpse of an artist consistently

aware of her limitations but perpetually in the process of pushing her art. Sensitive to how medium or form complements the content of her works, Locsin knows when to stop, shift gears, and then proceed, but still always making connections with her previous works. Upon reading the descriptions of her works, one sees the common themes that run through her neo-ethnic and urbanative choreographies. While the former resonate themes of nature, rituals, Asian arts, ethnic dances, and history, the latter, deal with contemporary issues like gender and war and are often inspired by contemporary literature and the arts, and of course, love.

I would like to look at the neo-ethnic and urbanative paths as proofs of Locsin's probing artistry. The two are not separate and distinct but intertwined paths. Not even parallel paths, but inextricably linked paths. She shifts when the need arises—she admits that even if she was already into urbanative, she continued to do neo-ethnic because it provided her students with good training and Manila was still interested in her neo-ethnic works (Locsin, email to author, July 24, 2011)—without really being bothered by the fluidity of her works. Pondering upon her career, she explains that “I am still very much in touch with the ethnic of the Filipino soul in dealing with its current environment; which means I'm still very much neo-ethnic. More so... I think” (Locsin, email to author July 24, 2011).

There is something to be appreciated in Locsin's candor when she says the question on when she shifted to urbanative has made her think deeply about when and why she changed course. It is the honesty in admitting that she still has to determine, with the help of her former dancers, exactly when the change occurred that is to be admired. The unplanned shift¹² may be read as an artist's way of grappling with both medium and content. This reminds us of what modern dance and choreographer Rod Rodgers said in the 70s: “The highest compliment an artist can pay his audience is to invite them to witness his exploration of the maximum possibilities of his art, based on his total experience” (in Brown 1979, 175). Looking back at the trajectory of both her neo-ethnic and urbanative, one sees such exploration, a continuous reconnaissance of what was out there in terms of movement and issues in relation to her needs and limitations as a choreographer. Both movement vocabularies attest to how dance, according to the Mexican-American choreographer, Jose Limon, can “ritualize the greatest tragedies and ecstasies of man. It is in its power and province to reaffirm the dignity of man in an age that desperately needs this admiration” (in Brown 1979, 104).

Creating works in Davao, Locsin is impelled by a commitment

to do something for dance. If she had contributed to the growth of modern dance in the Philippines when she was based in CCP, she sees her efforts these days geared towards continuing the legacy of her mother, bringing to Davao, what the “center” enjoys—various choreographic techniques and discourses.

Being the “mother” of numerous choreographers who have become professional contemporary dancers and choreographers, both here and abroad, has been a blessing to Locsin’s vision. When her “babies” rehearse with and create pieces for her in Davao, she lets them handle the classes in her studio, thus exposing her students to different techniques of dance. Her philosophy that has informed her modern and contemporary works – that belief in being open to all forms of techniques—remains the same. In Davao, she tells her own students to absorb everything that her guest choreographers/teachers share with them. This, she believes is crucial in developing the students into versatile dancers and sensitive choreographers (her studio offers ballet as this is more “sellable” to middle-class families; another studio is being built for jazz classes). Considering the realities of dance in the Philippines, in Davao in particular, Locsin’s advice to her students is a practical one. In order to survive in a nation whose institutions provide little support for the arts in the regions, dancers have to be flexible— both literal and figurative—for all sorts of productions, including “rackets” which are the major source of income of dancers in Davao.

And to take choreography in Davao to another level, Locsin has organized workshops on modern and contemporary dance. Although the term “neo-ethnic dance” is loosely used in Mindanao—if one is not *lumad* and choreographs, his/her work is considered “neoethnic”—and hardly theorized, she recognizes the “gwapo” (i.e., “handsome”) creations of local choreographers. These creations, as Locsin demonstrates some of their movements, combine strong stomping on the ground, flexed feet and hands, and pelvic contractions. Indeed, they are handsome choreographies by dancers who are exposed to various ethnicities in Mindanao. Mario Lim, head of the KALUMON Dance Theater Ensemble and inspired by the desire to pass on the heritage of the ethnolinguistic groups of Davao, has researched their movements, facilitated discussions with people in ancestral domains, and transformed their narratives into dance. His group joined Locsin’s October 2010 workshop which had guest choreographer Myra Beltran sharing with them the principles of contemporary choreography—the use of time and space, the logic of partnering, the basic rules in all dances (even indigenous dances have their sets of rules), and the importance of concept and discourse—that could not only help

them in conceptualizing and creating more pieces but likewise provide them with additional movements for their dance vocabulary. In inviting Beltran, Locsin was interested in seeing how the more “cerebral” approach to dance by Beltran combines with the more “gut” driven movements of Davao’s choreographers.

While the first workshop Locsin organized charged a minimal fee, the second and third were free. It was the former Ballet Philippines director and choreographer Denisa Reyes who conducted the first workshop and Beltran, the second. For both workshops, Locsin was able to get NCCA funding to cover the transportation and professional fees of the guest choreographers. And in both instances, her house had been the temporary home of her guest artists.

Although Locsin would humorously dodge my questions pertaining to her theory /philosophy of dance, all her efforts—from her Ballet Philippines days to the time she began another phase of her career in Davao—are part of what I see is her dream for dance in the Philippines. On this matter, she laughingly says: “I have no vision... If it’s unconscious, then I cannot know it, right?” Despite this pronouncement, one cannot ignore the commitment to both the art form and community that has driven Locsin through the years. What motivates a choreographer in a postcolonial nation to keep on creating dances, mounting productions, and organizing workshops at a loss? “Lugi” is what characterizes her endeavors as she shoulders most of the cost entailed by her projects. She is, however, candid about the fact that it is easier to be principled when one is financially secure.

So what drives her? On a personal level, perhaps it is her occasional feeling of being “alone” in Davao. Keeping dance in Davao alive is a way of providing her craft company, contributing to an inspired community will feed not just her artistic needs, but those of others as well.

But Locsin is first and foremost a Filipino choreographer. She is an artist whose works are defined by her national realities—cultural, historical, political, and aesthetics. Working in the region, she continues to make her presence felt not just in the center where her choreographies are staged but likewise all around the country as she takes her productions and dancers to different provinces.

She says that “through choreography [neo-ethnic] I aim to create movements derived from dances in the history of my beloved country. I am a Filipino proud of my heritage and my work is my tribute to Philippine history” (Locsin forthcoming, n.p.). Her works and projects in the 21st century are likewise tributes to Philippine history, a more contemporary

one, that is.

In a few years, Davao will have a dance festival similar to the WiFi¹³ (i.e. with contemporary choreographies). It was poet Ricardo de Ungria who prodded Locsin to organize such festival because like Manila, Davao could have one of its own. Locsin hopes that the workshops she offered in the past years would prepare the local choreographers for the festival. Hopefully, with an expanded movement vocabulary—contemporary, modern, and neo-ethnic—the choreographers will also help conceptualize street dancing and other dance festivals. Compared to Cebu’s *Sinulog* and Iloilo’s *Dinagyang*, Davao’s *Indak-Indak* can claim no distinct identity as it appears to be an imitation of the *Dinagyang*. The choreographies of the latter, are impressive, according to Locsin. In fact, they bear traces of her neo-ethnic grammar perhaps because she had worked with several artists and dancers of Iloilo in the 90s when she choreographed the *Hinilawod*¹⁴ and conducted the Apic Workshop.

Because she believes that the “Pinoy is eclectic and is thus able to combine what is Asian and Western,” Locsin will always create works that will make the most of this ability.¹⁵ This fascinating quality of the Filipino which is also apparent in movement, makes dance a very powerful performance art to narrate the nation. Choreography is not only a language in which we write and re-write the past but is also an eloquent expression of the present—from the neo-ethnic to the urbanatives.

In their book *Art and Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking*, David Bayles and Ted Orland posit that: “...the art you can make is irrevocably bound to the times and places of your life... decisive works of art participate directly in the fabric of history surrounding their maker. Simply put, you have to be there” (52). Locsin’s works attest to her being “there,” at the vortex of history, the historical present, that is.

NOTES

¹ A considerable part of this paper is based on an interview with Agnes Locsin at the CCP Complex in on September 24, 2010 and in Davao on October 24-26, 2011.

² Locsin describes how the school started in the sala of her parents’ bungalow house in the 1940s and had a number of different names. The “Locsin Dance Workshop” became the official name in the 1970s.

³ Although Locsin was a strong figure in the field of modern dance, she was among a number of choreographers who also contributed to this area. Some of them were

Corazon Generoso Inigo, Esteban (Basilio) S. Villaruz, and Jess de Paz. Inigo was among the first generation of students who trained under the modern dance choreographer Trudl Dubsy; she later took classes with Alice Reyes at the CCP. In Villaruz's recollection, Dubsy even taught in UP during the pre-war years as she came to the Philippines in the 1930s. With Tony Fabella and Luis Layag, Villaruz followed the system of Alice Reyes when they taught at the CCP. And before Reyes and Locsin became the regular teachers of modern dance at the CCP, there were visiting choreographers and dancers who taught modern dance at the Anita Kane Studio—Norman Walker, Pauline Koner, and Betsy Escandor (Villaruz, e-mail to author, July 22).

⁴ The work highlights some of the “Igorot’s” daily routines, all rendered in classical ballet and the fusion of different dance forms. Ballet Philippines’ artistic director, Paul Alexander Morales recognizes the value of the work when he explains that “*Igorot* holds its ground as one of Ballet Philippines’ iconic pieces in its vast repertoire of classical, modern and contemporary work.

It was first performed on October 11, 1987 at the Meervart Theater in Amsterdam of the Netherlands as a work commissioned by Les Petite Theatre Amsterdam, a dance company of five dancers. Back in high school at the Philippine Women’s College of Davao City, and college at the Ateneo de Davao University, Locsin would see the performances of the Igorot dance during folk dance competitions and realized that an Igorot piece would always win. She has since then been fascinated with the synchronicity of the dance movements and has thus used the formula she identifies as: “cygnets=unison dance=Igorot maidens” (Dakudao, “Agnes Locsin’s *Igorot*”).

⁵ She contemplated on creating an Igorot dance using the modern dance narrative and the fieldwork in Bontoc was part of her research before she created the work. “That was quite a trip and I still remember so many details of the journey... I remember the women and children coming to the mission house, curious at our presence. When they found out why we were there, they took us to a gathering hall, took out pans and pots and taught us their dances. In exchange, I taught them disco dancing. We jammed. Afterwards, the women sang songs and played the nose flute for us,” Locsin remembers (Dakudao, “Agnes Locsin’s *Igorot*”).

⁶ The success of *Igorot* made Locsin realize how the Bayanihan was a strong presence in her career and works. Although she both recognized and appreciated such influence, she wanted to create another piece—the *Bagobo* which was so “minimalist in movements compared to *Igorot*.” The former did not see as many performances as the latter but this did not discourage Locsin from considering it a piece “contrapuntal” to her famous *Igorot*. In fact, *Bagobo* was a “perfect choice” because the piece was closer to the reality of the people of Davao, the Bagobo, being one of their tribes. With her new work, Locsin’s choreographies traversed the Northern and Southern Philippines (Locsin, e-mail to author, July 22, 2011).

⁷ Locsin is known as a modern dance choreographer and she even distinguishes her style from those of Beltran and the other contemporary dancers. But because I use the definition of “contemporary dance” in Joseph Gonzales’s book

Choreography: A Malaysian Perspective (2004) where he includes the styles of Graham, Cunningham, Hawkins, and Limon-- I consider her works in my study of contemporary choreographers.

⁸ Here we assume that the woman was referring to their Bontoc dance and not really to an "Igorot dance" because the people in the North identify themselves according to their ethnolinguistic groupings.

⁹ Although references identify only six groups, Locsin mentions that the Kankanaey is not included in the list and feels that some people— including one of her dancers— from the higher regions of Benguet are aware of such exclusion.

¹⁰ In observing contemporary North American dances, he is annoyed at seeing the "mix match of cultures as if they were nothing more than ingredients of a nouvelle cuisine. Almost everyday, press releases arrive in the mail that breathlessly announce a fashionable (and no doubt fundable) fusion of culture differences: hybrids of breakdancing and butoh, ballet and Bharatanatyam"(1993, 27) .

¹¹ The pulse of the urban Filipino resonates in the sentimental, and even maudlin song of Eddie Peregrina and the hilarious but witty song of Yoyoy Villame.

¹² Biag Gaongen, Locsin's dancer and "sounding board in the past ten years," remembers seeing her tired of doing neo-ethnic for over a decade (Locsin, e-mail to author, July 24, 2011). Another dancer, Camille Joson, characterizes the style that came after the death of Locsin's father as one that was seemingly "broken and helpless." Joson nonetheless describes the urbanative *Four Last Songs* as a rebirth of Locsin as a choreographer (e-mail to Locsin, July 25). Christine Maranan, also a dancer who experienced the shift in Locsin's choreographies, initially resisted the "movement exploration" because it was unfamiliar to her body. This notwithstanding, she eventually found something "liberating" in the new form which for her was "not totally far from neo-ethnic movement [because] there was still groundedness" (e-mail to Locsin, July 29, 2011). Judelle de Guzman Sicam shares Maranan's opinion on how the urbanative pieces were "still grounded" and "earthy," requiring the solidity of both "supporting leg and torso" (e-mail to author, July 25, 2011).

¹³ The WiFi Body Independent Contemporary Dance Festival is a gathering of dancers all over the country. Launched in 2006, the festival was conceived to follow the trajectory of the Contemporary Dance Map series which in 2005, had performances in alternative spaces all over the Philippines. Since 2006, the festival has expanded to embrace two hundred thirty-two (232) dance artists in twenty (20) dance organizations, with an average of fifty (50) choreographers, and with fifty-two (52) contemporary dance premieres a year. It is definitely the biggest dance event in the country.

¹⁴ *Hinilawod* (i.e., "'Tales from the mouth of the Halawod River'"), discovered in 1955 by anthropologist F. Landa Jocano, is considered the oldest and longest epic of the Western Visayas. It is a treasure of the Sulod people in the mountains of central Panay who use the epic as source of information about the religion and rituals of the ancient Sulod culture. This chanted and performed epic which has 28,340 verses, tells the story of the adventures of three Sulodnon demigod

brothers, Labaw Donggon, Humadapnon and Dumaladap of ancient Panay. As it takes around three days to complete the performance of the original epic, the *Hinilawod* is considered one of the longest epics in the world, even longer than the *Iliad* which has 15, 700 verses (<http://www.manilatimes.net/index.php/life-and-times/showtime>).

¹⁵ She would remind a former student and now contemporary choreographer, Dwight Rodrigazo, that he should not restrain himself from asking more from his company members because she believes that they have much more to give as dancers.

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