

Ricardo G Abad+: Gawad Tanglaw ng Lahi Award response

Ateneo was Home for Ricky. Some, perhaps many, of you knew him from his expressive and lively presence on campus: his talks – remember his “Happiness is Contagious” workshop?, his hosting of events, his classes, and most of all, as actor and director in his theatrical productions. Ricky once said, “I liken myself to a minstrel. The minstrel of medieval times was a performer who delighted not only in pleasing the public but also in teaching the public through the medium of entertainment...The idea of performing and instructing at the same time...is something I’ve always wanted.”

Ricardo G Abad (“Ricky”) had two passions in life (*kahiligan*, he called it): Sociology and Theater Arts, inseparable passions, one enriching the other, playing out in parallel and overlapping lines on a stage that was the Ateneo. His contributions in fusing sociology and the arts were extraordinary--spanning research, scientific publications, performance, acting, directing theater, writing creative works, teaching, social commentary, and outreach. His body of work includes over 100 publications and academic papers, over 200 theater productions, and over 300 workshops and webinars in theater arts, teaching practices, Philippine culture, and social research in both Pilipino and English. He shared these passions unselfishly with friends,

colleagues, students, actors, community workers, prison inmates, and disadvantaged youth. He was a mentor to many through life's passages and across generations: *ninong* at their weddings, *ninong* to their children, teacher to parent-child students.

As Fr Rene Javellana described him: "he was cool -- he was the Man for Others, *Cura Personalis* and the *Magis* guy all rolled into one". And as Fr recounts, "if the teachers at the Loyola School of Theology have a lilt in their lectures and penetrating gazes at their audiences, and students and graduates deliver better homilies and read the gospel not like a shopping list but with understanding and a subtle dramatic flair, it's because of Ricky's Workshops."

Ricky's innovation in theater, here and elsewhere, was his localization of Shakespeare: "the playwright's words, yes, but infused with a Filipino and Asian sensibility". He extended his mentor Rolando Tinio's work from translating Western classics into Pilipino to finding the Filipino heart in Shakespeare. He was much appreciated abroad by colleagues for his work on "decolonizing" the playwright or as he described it in his disarmingly cheeky way, a "Sweet-Sour Shakespeare". His legacy lives on in such places as India, China, Vietnam, Spain, Belarus, Malaysia and in Subic, Bohol and the streets of Vigan. His papers and stagings of

reimagining Shakespeare in the early 2000s launched his reputation as an international director and placed Ateneo theater on the international scene for the first time.

Ricky's reimagining of Western classics was part and parcel of his turn toward the intercultural, or in his words, "the interweaving of different cultures in a theatrical production... The question is not so much what the play or author says, but what the classic text says about the present... in practice, it means listening to other cultures, voices, or performing traditions". This "entanglement" of cultures was realized in Ricky's *Sintang Dalisay*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in an imaginary Muslim setting, that deployed the *igal*, the dance of the Sama Bajau, as the movement and overall motif. In Ricky's words, *Sintang Dalisay*, was in the end, "an opportunity to use the power of the theater to build dialogue between two groups that have misunderstood each other for centuries. Truly, it is a utopian vision of theater."

Sintang Dalisay would be Ricky's most famous work. Armed with Salvador Bernal's set designs and the actors of Tanghalang Ateneo it would be performed more than 60 times here and abroad. This "entanglement" of cultures would be his lasting and distinctive contribution as a Filipino theater artist.

But “the interweaving task was more than an aesthetic effort, it was also an occasion to comment on the machinations of the dominant political apparatus.” For this reason, Ricky selected plays where characters strive to break down or resist obstacles that impede the practice of noble ideals, among them: the inequities of class in Clifford’s *Light in the Village*, freedom of speech in Ibsen’s *The Enemy of the People*, colonial oppression in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, the heartlessness of dictatorships in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, and the fight for political independence in *Bayani*. For Ricky and his cast and crew, theater was “liberating and empowering.” Implicit in Ricky’s vision of theater was the quest for social transformation.

As Ricky did with Art, he did with Sociology. Sociologists use the phrase the “Sociological Imagination” to describe a way of making connections between private and public worlds, the particular and the general, and biography and history. “This means, in order to think critically, we need to link what is happening to us in our small worlds with larger, systemic forces that rule us all.”

Thus he did sociology with a critical lens on the structures of power and wielded the power of art at authorities who curtailed, dulled, and oppressed. He once explained the role of sociologists in society as

“regularly debunking presuppositions by looking behind conventions of power and questioning official definitions of political reality.” His groundbreaking work on *Social Capital in the Philippines* based on his reading of Social Weather Stations surveys is on the must-read list of many a course on social inequality in Ateneo and elsewhere.

And finally, Ricky combined his creative energy with a compassionate heart to be of service to others. Through a social enterprise group he formed with Tanghalang Ateneo members called *RolePlayers*, he launched in 2005 many continuing projects such as: his “Art of Directing People” workshops for Ateneo’s Center for Continuing Education leadership program, his “Dynamic Classrooms” activity for teachers on how to use theater to effectively deliver their lessons, his “Theater for Kids”, which gave acting workshops to disadvantaged youth to build confidence to express themselves, and his “Shakespeare at Bilibid”, his project of workshops and performances which offered the young inmates, in his words, “a safe space for them to create characters, bond with others and assume roles in production more edifying and diverse than those experienced in their incarcerated lives.” During the pandemic, he collaborated with Ateneo Children’s Theater for *Sandaang Salaysay*, an Arete podcast of Filipino children’s stories which opened up to the very

young our oral and literary heritage in a way that was engaging and accessible. Following the pandemic lockdowns, he produced *Azul: Ang Sirena ng Sigwa*, a play on resource conflicts and climate migration and a video presentation on *Risk and Resilience in the City*, which synthesized the research and public actions of scientists working with coastal cities.

Ricky held many positions: on campus, among others, as Department Chair of Sociology-Anthropology and as IPC Director, in national academic organizations such as President of the Philippine Sociological Society, and as Board Member in theater arts organizations such as the International Association of Theatre Leaders. Fr Jett Villarin described him as “a shoo-in” for Arete’s first Artistic Director “because he embodied its spirit of tradition and rebellion, discipline and fluidity, rootedness and transcendence.” He was honored with many awards in Ateneo, among them, A Lifetime Award in the Humanities (where he was a founding director of the Department of Fine Arts), Outstanding Work in Social Science, Professor Emeritus, and Best Moderator Award for his work in Tanghalang Ateneo. He was deservedly recognized by the community at large with the Metrobank Outstanding Teacher Award in 2001 and again in 2009, the Metrobank Award for Continuing Excellence and Service, and

best director honors from Performing Arts organizations such as ALIW and Golden Leaf Awards.

Ricky's commitment to social justice as sociologist and artist was embodied in his insistence that "Theater was not just an Art, it was a weapon of change. And the better the students become, the more effective they will be in liberating people (including themselves) from oppressive systems, intellectual rigidity, and moral backwardness."

As a sociologist and theater artist, Ricky Abad crafted the ability to merge scientific logic and artistic intuition, a disposition that enabled him to do creative sociology and analytical theater. In this work – as teacher, scholar, institution builder, and performing artist, a colleague would say "Ricky's theater moved my intellectually-driven life to take on softer textures, patterns, and hues as far as viewing and acting on the world that lies before me. For me, the ability to transform people's hearts and spirits is much, much more than a mark of excellence and achievement but a distinct marker of man's creative impetus and leadership before humanity and the nation."

In 2010, when asked what he thought his legacy was, Ricky answered " I would like to think that during my stay in the Ateneo, I have moved or

inspired people to do good, to be better persons, to love the country. That's my spirit in others."

We can never replicate Ricky as performance artist nor can we recapture his creative genius but we can look for inspiration in many of his efforts to interweave his two passions, Sociology and the Arts, in the service of a better world.

So, thank you Ateneo and the Jesuits for providing My Dear Ricky with the welcoming and nurturing environment to do his work and his art. And thank you, too, to his friends, colleagues, collaborators, students and mentees who will now carry on his legacy.

elizabeth uy eviota, 6 november 2024