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Theater for education and liberation

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

1.1 Title of practice or experience

PETA: Theater for education and liberation

1.2 Category of practice/experience and brief description

The Philippine Educational Theater Association, one of the most outstanding cultural groups in the Philippines, believes theater is not just an art form and is not just for entertainment. Theater can be used as a very effective medium for education and for liberation.

From the time of its inception, and especially during the Marcos administration, PETA spearheaded a cultural resurgence in the Philippines with the aim of developing a national theater movement that would reflect the people's condition, history and experiences of struggle, their hopes and their aspirations. A people's theater for empowerment and development, especially of the most disadvantaged sectors of society. A theater movement that would contribute to the individual's need for personal actualization and the people's need for societal transformation.

1.3 Name of person or institution responsible for the practice or experience

Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA)

1.4 Name and position of key or relevant persons or officials involved

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2. THE PROBLEM OR SITUATION BEING ADDRESSED BY THE PRACTICE/INNOVATIVE EXPERIENCE

The Philippines' long colonial history has to some extent contributed to the distancing of Filipinos from their indigenous value-systems, traditions, rituals, songs and dances. The prevalence of a highly-Westernised modern culture has prevented the development of a Filipino cultural identity based on the country's rich indigenous heritage.

The colonial period saw the development of theatre traditions which reinforced existing hierarchies of social and political power. From religious dramas to popular variety **shows**, theatrical productions tended to reproduce dominant colonial stereotypes of Filipino identity.

After independence, the country's political and economic stability gradually worsened into crisis. The Philippines was faced with huge foreign debt, rising inflation, widespread unemployment and the challenges of meeting the social development of a large and poor population. In this context, the need for a viable medium of articulation and expression, as an alternative to the mainstream media, grew stronger. Both art and information, however, were subject to strict scrutiny and censorship during the Marcos regime.

Since the fall of the Marcos government in 1986, there has been an easing of restrictions on the media. It remains however, that the cultural scene con-

tinues to be dominated by a Westernized and commercialized culture that is not reflective of the Filipino people's history, experiences, values and realities.

The people's issues and concerns, their hopes, dreams and their aspirations need expression and a medium of expression. The Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) addresses this need through the People's Theater and the School for People's Theater, which strives to educate the Filipino people about the richness of their heritage, and liberate them from the forces that threaten to erode that cultural wealth.

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICE/INNOVATIVE EXPERIENCE AND ITS MAIN FEATURES

PETA, like other nationalist organizations in the country, took form in the middle of the political and social unrest of the late sixties. The realities that existed in the country during the late seventies and early eighties further contributed to its development. But it grew strong mainly because it was nurtured by the heightening political and social consciousness of a people whose long search for national identity and sovereignty was slowly taking shape.

Cecilia Reyes Guidote founded PETA in April of 1967. She came from an upper-middle-class Filipino family and was then a fresh graduate of a masteral course in drama from the Trinity University of the United States of America.

The concept

Unlike many Filipinos who had studied in the US, Guidote was deeply cognizant of existing social realities in her country. She was proud of her own Filipino heritage. And she wanted to change, not her Filipino culture, but practices and programs which led the masses of Filipinos away from their national identity.

She strongly believed the depiction of art, in theater as well as in other forms, could find meaning only within the context of Filipinos' lives. She envisioned a national theater movement that would make the arts accessible to the masses of Filipinos, not only to those born to the higher echelons of society. The young woman was determined to use the theater and the skills and knowledge she had acquired, as a weapon to counteract the forces which subjugated the Filipino people's spirit.

In its Preamble, PETA declared: "The theater plays a tremendously significant part in the growth, development and propagation of a country's culture and arts. Particularly in these distressing times of 'mass culture' (a cul-

ture propagated by the mass media) which tends to confuse instead of edify minds, corrupt instead of purify taste, there is an almost compelling need for theater to be at the vanguard of a movement to lift man's spirit ..."

This grandiose mission was guided by the need to clarify the people's identity as Filipinos toward the formation of a national culture and eventually liberate them from an alienating culture. It thus required PETA to initiate and nurture a national theater movement for the promotion of a national culture, and, as such, develop groups of socially committed artists-teachers-leaders that would spearhead and bring to the fore such a movement in various parts of the country.

There also remained the need to raise the level of national and social consciousness among artists and audiences, which pushed PETA to create a Filipino people-based theater aesthetics, one that reflects what they now call the "aesthetics of poverty".

In essence, theater as an art form, and PETA as the vanguard of the national theater movement, were called upon to awaken the people and act as a catalyst for social transformation.

The People's Theater

At first, Guidote managed to recruit only four more associates into PETA. There were others, but many stayed only as guest actors/actresses or directors. The four worked on their own, most of the time draining their own personal, financial and logistical resources to get their productions through. Later, Guidote encouraged several students in her drama class at a local college to become members of PETA. And with a dedicated workforce and a vision, PETA strove "to embrace the capital, the cities, the towns and the barrios of the Philippine islands." (van Erven, 1989)

After a few years, the Kalinangan Ensemble, PETA's professional performing arm, was formed. It branched out to poverty-stricken communities, to schools, to trade unions and to remote peasant communities. In addition to its performances, PETA was also able to lay the groundwork for an experimental theater, an international exchange program, a touring company, a television and cinema unit and a performing arts academy. But in 1972, Martial Law was declared.

Before the declaration of martial rule in 1972, many considered theater "a secondary activity, a useful means to attract and entertain an audience between speeches at political rallies, but not a political weapon in its own right". But after the declaration of Martial Law, theater was recognized as a potent and practical tool for political expression and PETA took "its first hesitant steps on the slippery surface of political culture with several socially critical

plays". (van Erven, 1989)

Most of these plays were staged at the "Dulaang Rajah Sulayman" (the Rajah Sulayman Theater)', characterized by what was conceptualized by Guidote as an "open" theater. The structure, which is an open-air theater, has been described by Grefalda, in an article entitled "Life at the Ruins", as "sculptural, three-dimensional, easily restricted, easily enlarged. Light and sound form an integral part of its space and its basic feeling is that **of** size and strength".

Aside from these inherent qualities the Rajah Sulayman Theater renders to each PETA play, creative sounds and original musical scores also enhance each production. PETA conducts research and studies on ethnic and tribal music and sounds, always to provide itself with an understanding on the context and significance of each art form *so* that choices of production design and musical arrangement suit each particular play, especially if the story concerns indigenous people. It uses a lot of materials and resources on Philippine traditional theater and indigenous art, sculptures, installation art, masks and puppetry. Several forms are combined, not only to enhance the play with ornaments but to be a medium in itself, to bring their message to the fore. Ernesto Cloma, PETA's present Program Director for Curriculum Development, says, "A PETA artist-teacher must be proficient in integrating various arts toward developing an issue or theme."

The use of the audience's language (mainly Filipino) is almost always stressed. As Ernesto Cloma puts it, "theater should tell the people's stories in the language of the people."

Creative movements used by the participants are confusingly **of** different origins but are beautifully combined. Western influences are noticeable in the form **of** ballet and modern jazz movements. But gestures identifiably Eastern, specifically those originating from the martial arts (Korean, Chinese, kung-fu and *arnis*), are more commonly used to enhance stage presence and projection. Many plays also make use of movements and dances from Filipino ethnic groups, especially those **of** the Muslim Filipinos in the southern part **of** the country and the indigenous people of the Cordillera in the northern hinterlands. **In** each adaptation, there is always an element **of** improvisation and experimentation. And this is where the strength of PETA's performances lies: in their ability to experiment and improvise in order to always create something new, something distinct and yet familiar. The training of each performer in creative movements and its precise execution is a part of PETA's inventive program.

With the Dulaang Rajah Sulayman, PETA's experiments with movement, and the use of creative sounds and original musical scoring, PETA "stormed out of the mirrored, self-conscious palace of the conventional theater and started the big movement to render the theater accessible to all." (Almazan, 1983)

The principle of propagating what PETA calls a “mass-oriented culture” is also very evident in the group’s production designs. Many stage props and backdrops are strikingly common but purposively and creatively designed. “Artistically, a typical PETA style was beginning to emerge in the productions. This style came to be known as the ‘aesthetics of poverty’, the fruits of artistic inventiveness forced upon the company by a chronic lack of finances.” (van Erven, 1989)

Brenda Fajardo, PETA designer in 1985, had explained, “How can an artist claim to be socially responsible when he mounts high-cost productions during times of deprivation? But what is initially a by-product of material poverty becomes an expression which results from his sensitivity to the world around him. The artist begins deliberately to choose particular nuances and tones of color and texture that would express the qualities that he perceives around him – economic deprivation, cultural pollution, and violence. He evolves a new art which is authentic because it expresses life which happens to be poor; thus, the ‘aesthetics of poverty’ it implies that there is a sense of beauty which belongs to people who live in a condition of material deprivation.” (van Erven, 1989)

The production entitled *Juan Tambo* is one of the best examples of PETA’s application of the principles of the “aesthetics of poverty”. The set was conceptualized and created by a designer’s pool through a deliberate collective process. The group first went on a fact-finding mission to several of the metropolis’ shanty towns, or what is locally called “the squatters’ area”³. There, they chose pieces for the play’s set based on each material’s capacity to evoke meaningful and functional images, not for ornamentation nor for local color. For instance, empty plastic pails were lined up in rows and formed part of the set to suggest the lack of water supply, a basic government service being neglected in many urban poor communities (van Erven, 1989).

Up to the present, the concept of the aesthetics of poverty makes PETA stand out. It struggles to get by with little or no funding at all, and, as a result, is forced to work with found materials and junk which it employs so creatively.

At the back of PETA’s strengths, however, was a very striking irony: from 1967 to 1974, “PETA’s repertory consisted mainly of adaptations, imitations and translations of predominantly western plays”. (van Erven, 1989) In the same grain, PETA had to invite foreign directors for many of its plays, among them, Brook Jones of the Cincinnati Playhouse, and Ladislav Smocek, a guest theater director from Czechoslovakia.

This seemed to contradict its beliefs. But closer scrutiny helps us understand that this occurrence was a by-product of social and cultural realities existing during that same period. Cultural work was financially fulfilling only

if the cultural worker catered to the elite. And the taste of the Filipino elite was not Filipino- but foreign-oriented. Cultural programs, projects and scholarships that aim to develop Filipino playwrights and directors with a nationalist orientation were virtually non-existent. As such, at that time, PETA had very little material and human resources to work with.

In spite of this problem, PETA did not lose sight of its strategic objectives.

In staging these translations and adaptations, PETA had made careful and intelligent choices. Lutgardo Labad, one of PETA's artistic directors, admits, "PETA also drew lessons from the heritage of Western Theatre as one form of stimulus for the development of a national dramatic literature." These adaptations, he claimed, proved to be stepping stones to "unveil and clarify existing social contradictions" in Philippine society. Among them were the likes of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* and *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, which were translated into Filipino and adapted to Filipino conditions (Labad, 1983).

Nevertheless, PETA was quite aware of the limitations of these adaptations and in 1975 began to stimulate potential playwrights by including a scriptwriting course in the arts academy it had established. The course is a compact, comprehensive training program that it holds for six weeks every summer (van Erven, 1989). This training program proved to be the quantum leap that brought PETA where it is right now.

In 1975 alone, eight outstanding original Filipino plays were created. From then on, PETA made a conscious effort to develop excellence in the art of playwrighting. A writer's pool and a laboratory production scheme for new dramas were created. This strategy had mined gold in the form of several moving plays, among them, *Si Tatang at ang Iba Pang mga Tauhan ng aming Dula* (*The Old Man and the Other Characters of Our Play*, 1979), *Juan Tambo* (1979), *Panunuluyan* (*The Search for an Inn*, 1979), *Pilipinas Circa 1907* (*The Philippines During the 1900s*, 1982), *Buwan at Baris* (*Moon and Gun in a Flat Major*, 1984), and *Oratoryo ng Bayan* (*The People's Oratorio*, 1983). *The People's Oratorio* was striking, in particular because it dramatized, in song, dance and dialogue, very essential articles of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Using 11 cantos, it exposed the systematic violations of the Marcos regime of provisions to a universal declaration it was a signatory to (van Erven, 1989).

"*Si Tatang at ang Iba Pang mga Tauhan ng aming Dula* [which dramatizes the life and times of Valentin de los Santos, founder of the Lapinga Malaya or Freedom Party] is a historical documentary play that uses slides, newspaper clippings, and radio excerpts to convey its information." (van Erven, 1989).

Since April 1967, PETA has mounted more than 200 productions and performances of socially relevant plays, most of which are original. It has helped much in enriching Philippine contemporary theater through the study and use of various theatrical forms to ventilate local, national and international issues. It has also disseminated studies, reports of experiences and products of its own and those of the network's cultural and theater work and administration through its research, documentation and publication program.

Through its different productions, PETA made theater function as an effective tool for re-educating a people whose long colonial past had confused its national identity.

But PETA refused to exist simply as a cultural group. It carried upon its shoulders the more challenging task of propagating a national theater movement. This it achieved, not only by staging socially relevant plays, but also by developing a training program and by using workshops as a mechanism for organizing different sectors of the population.

The School of People's Theater

The School of People's Theater is PETA's training and teaching arm. It was once called the Central Institute of Theater *Arts* in the Philippines (CITAP) which, in 1971, was renamed the Central Institute of Theater Arts in Southeast Asia (CITASA) after PETA received a grant from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to expand CITAP and serve the entire Southeast Asian region.

Through the years, PETA was able to develop what it now calls the People's Theater Pedagogy. It is a creative, participatory and collective process which encourages not only the transfer of skills and the development of aesthetic excellence, but more so, the awakening, organizing and further development of a national and international people's theater movement.

It is creative because together with the people they teach, a lot of improvisation in drama, writing, visual art, music and storytelling is used. It is participatory because the content of the training, its objectives and results are drawn out of the people they serve, who come from various sectors of society (school youth, students, doctors and health practitioners, engineers, peasants, urban poor, trade unions, women groups, etc.).

PETA believes they are not omniscient teachers and trainers. They also learn from the group they teach while they teach. It is a collective process because everyone works together toward the attainment of common goals. Through the workshop and this training program, theater becomes a vehicle for development work, for the ventilation of issues, for organizing, for campaigns, for education, but most of all, for personal and social liberation.

Eugene van Erven, who did extensive and in-depth research on PETA in 1989, describes the process as follows:

Typically, PETA gets invited to do its outreach work by local people's organizations. "The dynamics, strategies and exercises of the people's theater workshop have evolved considerably over the years, but the basic structure remains the same. The workshop process can be divided into three phases: the pre-workshop period; the workshop proper and the post-workshop period." (van Erven, 1989)

In the pre-workshop period, the PETA actors-teachers-researchers⁶ who are tasked to facilitate the workshop first conduct an extensive investigation into the social, political, economic and cultural situation of their target group (i.e. the group, sector or organization who invited them). This they do even before going to a specific area or community. Local organizers or officials of the organization/group furnish them with the necessary data in written or oral form during several consultations.

Later, the actors-trainers-researchers visit the area to get acquainted with the people and their environment. This also gives them a chance to conduct informal interviews to enrich whatever data they already have.

According to van Erven, and PETA actors-trainers-researchers themselves, the best workshop results can be obtained if they, along with other participants of the workshop, can live and work together for several days at a stretch. Thus, the workshops are usually scheduled during strikes, holidays, or off-season periods for fishermen, plantation workers and farmers. It is also very important, they said, for them to live and eat with their target group and adapt themselves to the local conditions existing in the area. This practice becomes more important for workshops held in rural peasant communities. The rural population tends to look up to the educated middle class from the cities and this sometimes becomes an obstacle to achieving a creative liberation process in the workshop.

The workshop proper follows and can be further subdivided into three stages, namely:

- (a) integration with the community, group dynamics and get-to-know-you games;
- (b) basics of acting and drawing-out of people's stories through structural analysis of the community; and
- (c) production of a collectively created original script.

The workshop proper begins with the getting-to-know-you phase wherein games and exercises are used to break the ice between the participants and between the participants and PETA facilitators (of the workshop) in order to establish rapport, mutual trust and sensitivity.

After the getting-to-know-you phase, the facilitators try to find out ex-

actly what each individual participant expects to learn or gain from the workshop through another exercise. The cartoon-drawing exercise is most commonly used. At this stage, the participants get an initial exposure to acting because they are encouraged to imitate sounds, gestures, intonations and other characteristics of the other participants of the workshop.

In his research, van Erven observed that new participants are not encouraged to enter the group late (i.e. on the second or third day of the workshop proper). This, according to PETA members, is because the workshops are structured cumulatively. Relationships and collective working attitudes would have already begun to gel to such a degree that the introduction of a newcomer would only disrupt the process. For the same reason, the effectiveness of the second process depends on the success of the first. If inhibitions have not been sufficiently broken down and healthy cooperative group dynamics not been established, then the people's stories to be drawn out in the second phase will be proportionally meager.

One of the aims of the people's theater workshop is to be non-threatening and transparent. Upon completion of a certain phase or after major exercises, the whole group sits down at a round table for feedback. In addition to this, the facilitators also conduct a separate evaluation at the end of each day and make adjustments whenever necessary.

The second phase opens with a creative version of structural social analysis of the community. The participants are requested to make a "social map" where they indicate what they consider to be the most prominent landmarks in their community by means of symbols they can either draw, cut from a magazine or paint. They select, for instance, visual symbols of people or institutions that hold the reins of political or economic power in their community. The result of these is a collage that the participants exhibit in an improvised gallery and discuss. They come up with a unified view and analysis of their community and finally present their collective map in a short skit or in songs.

This structural analysis is always followed by a round-table discussion where participants tell stories of their lives or of others in their community. These stories, which are often moving, form the basis for the drama pieces that will evolve later on in the workshop. At this stage, the facilitators may opt to introduce basic acting techniques, or exercises in story construction and storytelling. Alternatively, they may introduce some more exercises that enhance imagination, creativity and spontaneity or activities that enhance trust and sensitivity between participants. Also during these exercises, the participants are able to explore the musical and rhythmical possibilities of common objects in their surroundings like cans and pieces of wood or bamboo. At the same time, while performing together, they realize how none of them should dominate the group with his or her instrument, for it disturbs harmony.

In the last phase of the workshop proper, one or more original people's plays are created and produced by the participants themselves, who by now would have virtually taken full control of the workshop process. Divided into groups of five or six, they work out scenarios based on the stories they have shared with each other. The participants are encouraged to utilize art forms indigenous to their culture. They also compose songs, rehearse and finally stage their plays. They perform either for the whole community or for the rest of the workshop group.

After the final showcase performance, the facilitators and participants get together once more for a final evaluation of the entire workshop. Results are matched with expectations shared in the beginning of the workshop and future possibilities are discussed. An effort is made to convince the participants that with a minimum of training and practice, they themselves can conduct workshops with other members of their community or in neighboring villages and towns. Often, the participants spontaneously decide to form their own community theater group.

4. DESCRIPTION OF THE INSTITUTION RESPONSIBLE AND ITS ORGANIZATIONAL ASPECTS'

PETA members describe themselves as "a community of theater artists dedicated to the development of a People's Theater that mirrors Philippine social realities, a theater that serves as a potent agent and instrument toward personal, social and societal transformation".

They envision the "full actualization of the human person. They envision a liberating people's culture, and a free society, a sovereign nation."

Their mission: to be a people's theater for empowerment; to develop and transfer skills using theater and related arts as a medium; to provide, most especially to the disadvantaged members and sectors of society, the necessary tools and instruments for personal actualization and societal transformation.

With these in mind, they aim to:

- (a) develop a theater that reflects the people's condition, history and experiences of struggle, their hopes and aspirations;
- (b) evolve People's Theater aesthetics and pedagogy, based on the people's actual condition, simultaneously raising standards of artistry in creative **work** and performance, enhancing competence and excellence in teaching and communication, and popularizing the creative use of theater for people's expression, education and organization;
- (c) promote and forge partnerships and linkages with theater groups at the sectoral, regional, national and international levels, as well as with non-

theater people's organizations sharing PETA's vision of man, culture and society; and

- (d) define, develop and operationalize the Dramatic Arts Center as a main synergizing mechanism for the development of resources, skills and facilities for People's Theater by the year 2000.

PETA has four main implementing units: the Dramatic Arts Center; the Partnership and Liaison Office; the Program Support Services; and the PETA Broadcast and Film, Inc.

(a) The Dramatic Arts Center (DAC) builds the infrastructure for the Institute of People's Theater. Under the DAC are:

- (i) The Kalinangan Ensemble. The Kalinangan Ensemble is the production and performance unit of PETA. It develops People's Theater Aesthetics.
- (ii) School for People's Theater. This is the training and teaching unit of PETA. It develops the People's Theater Pedagogy.
- (iii) People's Theater Resource Center. This is PETA's research, documentation and publication unit. It develops and makes accessible resources and facilities in the resource center.
- (iv) Theater Collectives. These are specialized production-performance-training-research and documentation units. Among the theater collectives are the Dance Theater Collective which develops a people's dance theater; and the Children's Theater Collective which develops People's Theater for children.
- (v) Playwrights Circle. This is a special study and training unit that develops People's Theater plays and playwrights.

(b) The Partnership and Liaison Office (PAL) develops People's Theater partnerships and linkages. At the national level, it coordinates and manages projects and programs with sectoral, regional and national networks. At the international level, it identifies, develops and coordinates cultural programs and projects with groups abroad supportive of PETA and the national cultural network's vision and goals. Under the PAL is the Marketing and Promotions unit which is in charge of public relations, marketing and sales for PETA's productions, workshops, conferences, publications and other activities.

(c) The Program Support Services (PSS) handles specialized administrative and managerial services and tasks. It takes care of Human Resource Management and Development, Financial Management and Office Administration.

(d) The PETA Broadcast and Film, Inc. (PETA-BFI) is a spin-off production-training-research unit with a very special concern: alternative mass media for people's empowerment. At present, it concentrates on alternative television programming. The unit intends to develop radio broadcasting and film as instruments for people's empowerment.

5. PROBLEMS OR OBSTACLES ENCOUNTERED AND HOW THEY WERE OVERCOME

Since the time of its inception, PETA has always had two perennial problems: money and ideology. The two are very closely related.

Funding has always been a problem because theater is widely seen only as a form of entertainment, something one indulges in after a hard week of work to relax and unwind. The theater's potential and capacity to be a medium of education and liberation is not recognized by many. Very few are willing to fund a theater production. The moneyed elite of the country, whom PETA attacks through its socially relevant plays, definitely do not want to fund a production that exposes their weaknesses. And the poor majority, who do recognize the theater's capacity to be a medium for social change, do not have the financial nor logistical capacity to sponsor expensive productions.

The ideological direction of PETA's productions has always been a problem because theater is seen mainly as a form of entertainment. And in entertainment, the aesthetic content of each production is a number one priority. In entertainment, the objective is to provide recreation, not the vexation of the mind and spirit through socially critical and sometimes dramatic and disquieting plays. In seeking entertainment, the objective is to escape from realities, not bring them to the fore of human consciousness; the objective is to trap one into a state of inaction, not induce action. The elite of the country benefit from and strongly favor the former objectives. The basic sectors of society benefit from and favor the latter. Through its more than 30 years of existence, PETA has been vexed by both problems. Its membership determines its direction and the methods the organization employs in order to handle both problems. And the bulk of PETA members come from the middle class of Philippine society, a class torn apart by its sympathies for the poor majority and its need to belong to the financially, politically and socially secure "cultured" elite.

Since most of PETA's members are young students who come from the middle-income group, the lack of financial returns **for** the time, energy and talent they invest in PETA does not become an issue – at first. However, when most of these students graduate, or marry and raise their own families, their perspectives change. Many branch out into the movies or into television productions where they earn a lot, leaving PETA with a diminished workforce and a need to recruit and train a new set of members.

In recruiting and training new members, PETA always puts the stress on the value of each member's commitment. A commitment to serving the poor, a commitment to mirroring reality, a commitment to becoming sensitive and socially responsible artists and teachers, and a commitment to practicing the principles of the aesthetics of poverty.

But this commitment is not easily developed. It is developed through a long process of internal and external struggles. Time and again, PETA members find themselves locked in a quiet rift. There are those who want to use theater as a liberating medium and those who are only after the artistic rewards of theater performance. In 1986, Labad, one of the most artistic directors PETA has ever produced, said, "PETA became more socially relevant through a historical process. In 1975, most of our writers came from the student movement and carried over the concerns that lived in the universities (which, at that time, were very critical of the Marcos dictatorship). But we had to be protective; that's why we were doing mostly psychological plays and artistic experiments. It was the workshop programs that really politicized our people (i.e. members) ..."

As such, PETA consciously launches training programs that would expose its members to social realities. They are encouraged to go to the slums, to the countryside, to the picket lines. They are encouraged to learn and feel the sentiments, hopes, dreams, experiences of exploitation and struggles of the people they serve. They are encouraged to be a part of the lives of the poor and the marginalized – if only for a short while. Only in this way can they depict the people's lives, can they understand the context of the "aesthetics of poverty", and can they carry out PETA's mission to be a medium of liberation.

At times, when the financial side of the problem dominates the scene, PETA exerts more effort to increase ticket sales and to find more sponsors for its productions. There are church groups, non-governmental bodies and even government agencies, schools and universities that support PETA.

It also enters into mutually beneficial partnerships with other organizations and institutions. In these schemes, it shares its skills and expertise in exchange for the logistical and financial resources of its partners.

PETA is acutely aware of its financial limitations and thus, always keeps production costs at a minimum. When production costs threaten to exceed the specified budget, substitutes (i.e. of materials and designs) are used, also in congruence with its principle, the "aesthetics of poverty".

It must be noted, at this point, that the "aesthetics of poverty" initially emerged as a solution to the organization's financial and logistical limitations. But it later developed into one of PETA's trademarks, an essential component of its practice. By practicing the principle, PETA has developed a resourceful and creative workforce, able to survive in dire conditions.

More than this, PETA has developed, over the years, a network of cultural groups from the basic sectors, from urban poor communities and rural peasant communities, from indigenous peoples' communities and trade unions. And these people's organizations remain PETA's strength. Their experience of deprivation has accustomed them to living a hard life, to utilizing

whatever resources are available, to making do with only whatever it is they have. For most of these groups, the constant lack of finances is not a problem. What they need is to develop a keener aesthetic eye in order to see what is beautiful around them and maximize its use. In most of these groups, such rifts as exist between PETA members are virtually non-existent. Among these groups PETA had helped develop, there is no question about the theater's role. It is their medium for education and for liberation.

6. EFFECTS OF THE PRACTICE/ INNOVATIVE EXPERIENCE

The particular effects of each PETA play can be gauged from the audience's reactions. A standing ovation is not uncommon after each PETA play. Spontaneous discussions and debates among peer groups who have just finished watching a play happen every time.

Whether PETA has just finished performing for a specific sector in a community or for the general public, its performances invariably result in an open forum of sorts in which the issues raised in the plays are discussed. In this sense, the people's theater can be regarded as a grassroots exercise in people's democracy. On a different level, people's theater can be a powerful instrument for communal therapy. It can assist a community in creatively expressing its defeats or in celebrating its victories.

It is not uncommon to find people being awakened and moved into action because of the social realism evident in PETA's plays. There were individuals, for instance, who became interested in the problems encountered by prostituted women in the vicinity of the former US Military Bases in Clark and Subic after watching a PETA play depicting the plight of these women. There were others who, after watching a play, became more open to discussions about national issues and would later be seen in rallies or demonstrations of nationalist organizations. Other forces (i.e. militant organizations actively recruiting and organizing individuals in a particular sector) are at play here but one cannot discount the fact that PETA's socially relevant plays served as an eye-opener for many.

PETA's workshops and training programs are even more effective. For the PETA facilitators, the workshop experience is infinitely more rewarding than a ten-minute standing ovation from a middle-class audience in Manila. For the workshop participants, they gain in courage and self-respect from discovering a voice and a creativity they never knew they possessed.

This increased confidence of community members in their own abilities and in the effectiveness of collective cultural action often results in direct social action.

Meanwhile, picket-line workshops organized in collaboration with the Kilusang Mayo Uno (First of May Movement) have had similar effects. In many ways, strikes are perfect occasions for such activities because the participants have time to spare. They are also in desperate need of a voice to express their grievances.

The most common result of workshops, however, is the formation of a new cultural group within the community or sector they have serviced. As such, PETA has helped give birth to hundreds of drama groups in schools, parishes, peasant communities, trade unions and other disadvantaged sectors in Philippine society.

In sum, PETA has succeeded in contributing to the development of a national theater movement, of which it is a part. This movement continuously contributes to the advancement of a national culture and a national identity. It is a movement that truly reflects the Filipino people's history, traditions, present conditions, struggles, dreams and aspirations.

7. SUITABILITY AND POSSIBILITY FOR UPSCALING

There is no question as to the suitability and possibility of upscaling the PETA practice. In fact, it is necessary, considering PETA's mission to further develop a national theater movement in the country and later, an international theater movement catering to the marginalized peoples of the world.

During the past decade, upscaling became its focus. As a result, PETA has formed different theater and dance collectives, in addition to playwrights' circles and other similar groups. Moreover, it has now expanded its operations to include broadcasting, and television and film production. TV and film productions, however, require large amounts of manpower, finance and logistical resources, which is a difficulty it is finding hard to overcome.

Similarly, its training program, which was expanded in the early seventies to reach out to other Southeast Asian countries, has been difficult to sustain. This is primarily because of the lack of finances and logistics.

Nevertheless, what is more important right now is to maintain and sustain its operations and the large network it has created. Meanwhile, it should further develop its capacity for resource mobilization in order to successfully implement projects related to broadcasting, and television and film production. The organization must also sustain and enhance its liaison work at the international level in order to be able to reach out to more marginalized peoples in other Third World countries.

As a fulfillment of many of its long-term goals, PETA plans to construct a Theater Center to enable it to pursue its vision of a Philippine Theater that is

truly integrated and vital to the development of people and society. The infrastructure shall provide the necessary venue that would ensure the company's sustainability. It shall be used as the physical base for all programs of PETA in community theater outreach as well as professional theater repertory performances. Apart from performances, the center will also serve as a learning space, where courses dealing with theater **arts**, educational theater, community theater, people's aesthetics and children and youth will be developed and taught. The Theater Center will also serve as a juncture for cultural exchange in the Asia Pacific region, facilitating the realization of an Asian-Pacific cultural awareness within a global multicultural space. At the same time, the center will function as a specialized resource center, where the expanding database of PETA's artistic and pedagogical experience shall be accessible to its constituents. And lastly, the Theater Center shall be the enduring symbol of PETA's significant role in Philippine Theater. It shall present the pioneering work PETA has done in influencing theater and education for the past thirty years. PETA sees the Theater Center as a fruition, a celebration of its decades-long commitment that has made possible the lasting achievements it has had in the past. The Theater Center sets a new beginning, a gate to the next millenium.

8. SIGNIFICANCE FOR (AND IMPACT ON) POLICY-MAKING

Much of PETA's impact on policy-making was indirect. PETA helped awaken the disadvantaged sectors who later moved to change policies and programs affecting their specific sector. Their performances, especially those staged in front of the Congress or Senate, added strength to the impact already created by militant organizations demanding changes from the government, especially during the time of the late President Marcos.

In the area of national culture, PETA, through its artist-members, moved for the formation of a Ministry of Culture, way back during the Marcos administration. This led to the establishment of the President's Committee on Culture and the *Arts* during the Aquino administration that later created the Cultural Bill or Republic Act No. 7356. This Republic Act provided for the creation of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts.

In spite of this, an elitist culture patterned after foreign tastes remains dominant. But the weakness here, it seems, lies not with PETA but with the dominance of foreign media and cultures.

9. POSSIBILITY AND SCOPE OF TRANSFERRING TO OTHER COMMUNITIES OR COUNTRIES

The community theater group PETA assists can best be regarded as a micro-media unit. As a product of PETA's Basic Integrated Theater Arts Workshops, its first activities consist of repeating the showcase performance in its own or neighboring communities.

Secondly, it organizes and echoes the workshop to other interested members of the community. From the start, the activities of the community theater group are split (like PETA was, before it expanded its programs) into training and performing, pedagogy and aesthetics. As a performing unit, the group develops original plays that are performed during important political or religious occasions. As a training unit, the group develops its own trainers who are capable of conducting outreach workshops. Thus, a snowball effect is created of one community theater group founding another and so forth.

In short, the practice of PETA is easily transferred to other communities within the country. Likewise, it is also possible for other countries to adapt the methods that are suitable to their particular situation and culture. The key is to unlock an individual's or group's creativity and resourcefulness. Another key is an in-depth understanding and appreciation of one's own culture and life.

Today, after more than 10 years of its systematic outreach training program, PETA can pride itself on some extraordinary sociopolitical and artistic results (van Erven, 1989).

In sum, it has given training and developed a curriculum in People's Theater through about a thousand workshops throughout the Philippine archipelago. It has initiated theater organizing and networking, helping give birth to hundreds of drama groups based in schools, parishes, communities, sectors, regions and even overseas. It has been to all corners of the Philippines, and has organized a network in the three major islands, Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. It has successfully created independent bodies that replicate PETA's work, whom it treats as partners and deals with on an equal footing.

It has also gone to Pakistan, Thailand, Indonesia, New Zealand, Australia and several Third World countries. There, it shared its skills, pedagogy and experiences for replication. Some of the countries it went to had their own existing theater groups. In such cases, PETA helped enrich both its own and the host countries' experience, knowledge and skills. It considers the International Drama Educational Association in Holland, the Asia-Pacific Adult Education, the World Council of Churches, the Asian Christian Communicators

and a few cultural groups abroad, some of which comprise overseas Filipino workers, as associates and partners in its unending cultural work.

Endnotes

1. The Rajah Sulayman Theater, which was designed and conceptualized by Guidote, was christened Rajah Sulayman in honor of the leader of the Mohammedan Malays who first inhabited the area (Almazan, 1983).
2. *Arnis* was a once popular Filipino martial arts technique for self-defense.
3. A “squatters’ area” is a cluster of shanties built by the city’s landless urban poor in a small vacant lot (which may be either public or privately owned land).
4. Bertolt Brecht was a German playwright who advocated what many call a “theater of liberation”.
5. This section has been lifted from Eugene van Erven’s research entitled *Stages of People Power: The Philippine Educational Theater Association*, The Hague, 1989.
6. PETA calls its pool of trainers actors-teachers-researchers because they perform all three functions at once, especially while facilitating workshops.
7. Lifted from *The PETA Brochure*, 1991.
8. The Kilusang Mayo Uno is an organization of militant labor unions in the Philippines. In the Philippines, Labor Day is celebrated on the first of May, hence its name.

References

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5. Interview with PETA members, Metro Manila, 1998.