

# A Cultural Gypsy

By Ermena Vinluan

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*Ermena* is the Eastern European version of the Spanish name Herminia. I was told that Ermena is a common gypsy name throughout Eastern Europe and means traveling troubadour of love songs. I'm sure my mother regrets giving me that name because it must seem to her that I have tried to live up to it all my life. As a cultural activist in the KDP I have lived around and about like a gypsy, organizing stage performances, poetry readings, recording sessions, house-to-house Christmas caroling fundraisers and more. And although very few of these have expressed romantic love, they did express another kind: love for Philippine music, my Filipino American heritage and for the struggles of working people, democracy and liberation.

My gypsy life in the political movement unsuspectingly began in the summer of 1973. I was an undergraduate in the Drama Department at U.C. Berkeley and taking my first ever Philippine Studies class. The teachers, John Silva and Bruce Occena, had asked me to co-author "*Isuda Ti Imuna*," ("Those Who Came First," in Ilocano) a play about the history of the "manongs," the Filipino "pioneers"--my own father's generation--who immigrated to the U.S. in the 1920s-'30s. Their story was one that we ourselves were just uncovering through the efforts of the tumultuous "Third World" student movements of the day<sup>1</sup>. We felt that the hidden history of our community had to be dramatized and popularized in some way: the blatant racism against Filipinos, the labor organizing efforts, the Watsonville Massacre of the late 1930's, the

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<sup>1</sup> On the West Coast the "Third World Student Strikes" of the late 1960s resulted in the formation of "Asian American Studies" at the university level. In the course of this struggle a radical "renaissance" took place in which hidden aspects of Asian American history were uncovered and pieced together by student activists.

writings of Carlos Bulosan, etc. And from this inspiration came our first full-length theater production, "*Isuda Ti Imuna*".

After two on campus performances with standing ovations from the nearly 750 people in the audience, the cast and crew finished that school semester and took the show on the road. "*Isuda*" was to be performed in the town of Delano in the Central Valley, the very place where our immigrant forefathers labored under the hot sun in the vast grape fields and fought over and over to have a labor union.

"*Isuda's*" caravan included a busload and several vans and cars with over 50 actors, musicians, dancers and crew. We were mostly college students from San Francisco State, U.C. Berkeley and junior colleges around the Bay Area; we included several Vietnam vets studying through the GI Bill, plus a number of high school students, and one of our choreographer-dancers was a young grandfather. After our Delano performance, we stayed the weekend and transformed ourselves into a work brigade, donating our time to the construction of a medical clinic for the members of the United Farm Workers union. The Delano community was at the heart of the UFW organizing, and there was still great conflict with the bosses of agribusiness like Gallo Wines over contract negotiation and defending their union.

Our road trip was fun--a lot of laughing and chattering on the bus, and a lot of singing. We sang songs from the play as well as other songs that many of us were learning for the first time: "*Ang Bayan Ko*" in Tagalog (My Native Land), "*Nosotros Somos Asiaticos*" in Spanish (We Are Asian), "*Imperialismo Lu Tenemos Avencer*" in Portuguese (We Will Conquer Imperialism) and songs from the Civil Rights movement. There was a lot of excitement and little sleep. We were young and carefree, on the road on our own, doing something that felt meaningful, taking theater to the community.

Since that first highlight of my life as a "cultural" gypsy, I have taken my trusty, rusty, yellow '67 Plymouth Barracuda on many road trips all over the West Coast, organizing cultural activities as part of the KDP's Sining Bayan (People's Artists). Sining Bayan was the "cultural arm" of the KDP. For approximately ten years starting in 1974, it functioned as the standing performing arts group guided by the KDP's National Cultural Commission. It took its name, and much of its mission, from the Sining Bayan cultural group at University of the Philippines of the late 1960s. The approach to cultural work was in the broad "agit-prop" (agitation-propaganda) tradition, in which productions were designed to educate and politically activate the audiences. Sining Bayan also drew inspiration from contemporary U.S. street theater troupes such as Teatro Campesino and the San Francisco Mime Troupe.

Sining Bayan also utilized a mixed bag of genres, principally theater. There was always music in its productions. Musical styles were varied, ranging from Philippine to U.S. folk, pop, Latin and blues. Productions also usually incorporated dance and/or choreographed movements and were simultaneously organizing campaigns to educate, mobilize and involve people. "The play is the thing" was not enough; the networking of artists, students and amateur cultural workers was just as important. Talent and experience were secondary considerations; if people were interested in the educational and political goals of Sining Bayan, they were invited to join. Rehearsals were hardworking affairs, as most of Sining Bayan's performers had had no previous stage experience. Attention was given to upholding high standards and developing performance skills. Extra rehearsals and individual coaching sessions were common<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Sining Bayan had 12 separate productions of seven different and original plays over a nine-year period: "Isuda Ti Imuna," 1973; "Maguindanao" (aka "Mindanao"), 1974; "Sakada," 1975; "Isuda Ti Imuna," 1976; "Tagatupad," 1976; "Isuda Ti Imuna," 1977; "Mindanao" 1978 (nine-city tour; 1979); "War Brides," 1979; "Ti Mangyuna," 1981 (Hawaii interisland tour; 12 performances)

Another notable journey was in the summer of 1976. I was in the National Cultural Commission at the time and I was being sent to Seattle for the summer to help the KDP chapter there in writing and directing "*Tagatupad*" ("The Ones Who Carry On"). I can still remember the beautiful ride up through the Pacific Northwest from San Francisco to Seattle as though it were only yesterday. The play itself was a one-act drama about the housing struggle of Asian-American senior citizens in the Chinatown-International District.

I have many sweet memories of Seattle. I recall befriending Jo Patrick, Carlos Bulosan's sweetheart, and meeting Barry Hatten, the former lawyer for the union, and Chris Mensalves, one of Carlos' best friends and a former president of the ILWU (International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Union). These three elderly comrades were a living part of Filipino American history, leaders in the heyday of radical politics in Seattle<sup>3</sup>. They regaled my friends and me with wonderful stories about Carlos Bulosan as we sat around the home that Jo and Carlos shared overlooking beautiful Lake Washington.

Jo also took me and Kasamang Glenn, another KDP activist, on a pilgrimage to Carlos's grave. When we picked Jo up on that cold foggy morning she was carrying something in a small brown bag. She told us of Carlos's often repeated request that after he died, should his friends ever visit him, they were to bring a bottle of port wine to drink and then pour on his grave, so that they could drink together like in the old days. When we arrived at Mt. Pleasant Cemetery, Jo had a hard time finding Carlos' grave, partly because the day was dark and the fog thick, but also, I think, because of the emotions she seemed to be feeling. She finally led us to the grave, and I was saddened to see that it was marked with little more than a small, humble concrete slab the size of a rolled up newspaper thrown on someone's doorstep. We quietly, solemnly, shared

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<sup>3</sup> Both Bulosan and Mensalves were active in the cannery workers union in the late 1940s and early 1950s. They were among the handful of Filipinos who were close to or members of the Communist Party at the time, when communists enjoyed substantial influence in the ILWU and a number of other trade unions.

a drink, communed with Carlos then walked away. Jo refers to us as the children that she and Carlos never had. And so, despite dreary weather and the even drearier grave marker, it was a beautiful experience to pay my respects to Carlos Bulosan, whose literary legacy has helped plant Filipino-American roots deep and strong in this land.

Seattle was steeped in Filipino-American history that was still so visible, so tangible. That summer also showed me how daring our KDP chapter was, especially the union organizing work they were doing to clean up corrupt gangster influences in Local 37.

My traveling troubadour years in the cultural movement also included driving a rented U-Haul truck full of theatrical props, costumes and lighting equipment across the frozen plains of Canada, in the winter of 1979, for a performance tour of "*Mindanao*," a contemporary drama about Muslim and Christian Filipinos banding together to save their farms and ancestral lands from local landgrabbers and corrupt politicians backed by the Marcos regime<sup>4</sup>.

All in all, we had a dozen stage productions of seven different plays in eight years. Whew! I should have carried a calling card: "Have cultural work will travel." However, after numerous cars, jeeps, trains, planes, buses and trucks, I never expected to be a sea gypsy. Never did I imagine myself sailing on a catamaran to my next performance. But there I was in November of 1981 on the *Aikane*, a native Hawaiian double pontoon boat skimming over sparkling azure seas from one performance to another, with a company of about twenty actors and crew, from the island of Molokai to the tiny island of Lanai.

The ocean was as dangerous as it was beautiful throughout the Hawaiian island chain. You have to be an excellent sailor to navigate a

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<sup>4</sup> "*Mindanao*" underwent revision after the play was criticized for simplistically depicting the Muslim elite as equally responsible as the Christian settler elite for the land evictions that victimized indigenous Moros. Professor Aijaz Ahmed of Rutgers University, a friend of the "KDP, which helped him study the Moro rebellion close hand, protested that the play's original version essentially obscured the "national" oppression of the Moros by the dominant Christian national elite.

boat through its treacherous sea currents and rocky shores. That's why practically all inter island travel was by airplane. Our friends and sponsors, the ILWU, worried about whether we could safely sail into Lanai's little dock. But flying into Lanai for a weekend performance was not possible. Lanai was the smallest of the five main Hawaiian islands with the Dole pineapple plantation as its one and only industry. And on weekend pau hana<sup>5</sup>, when work was over, everything in this company town shut down, including the airport. Back in 1981, Lanai had no tourist development, nary a hotel, let alone a golf course, to blight its pristine beaches. It was just one big pineapple plantation.

Meanwhile, back on our catamaran, the Aikane, we cruised along on fairly calm waters under beautiful weather. We were excited when this fantasy came true: lying on the deck in our shorts and tube tops; soaking in the sunshine and breathing in the freshest air on earth. We briefly roused ourselves when the captain let us take turns steering, and we scrambled to capture the thrill of that moment on our cameras.

Soon after though, we inevitably caught sight of the little dock on Lanai and my sea gypsy episode was over. My regrets, however, were short-lived because as we pulled closer to shore I could see a small crowd of people welcoming us with the most heartwarming aloha we had ever encountered. Little Lanai, isolated from the rest of the world every weekend, was enthusiastically awaiting our arrival. We were what was happening that weekend; we were the only show in town. Lanai's community greeted us not just with the traditional Hawaiian aloha kiss, but I could also feel it embracing us into the depths of its heart.

The plantation workers knew that this was not just any other show; this was their show, a story about their lives, and the lives of their parents and grandparents before them on the same plantations. And this was a show their own union was sponsoring. Our drama "*Ti Mangyuna*"

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<sup>5</sup> The Hawaiian term popularized by generations of plantation workers connoting the welcome rest after long, hard labor.

("Those Who Led The Way," in Ilocano) depicted the 1937 Filipino labor strike on a sugar plantation at Puunene, Maui<sup>6</sup>.

It was the KDP's offering during Hawaii's 75th anniversary commemoration of the Filipinos' arrival in the islands. The anniversary saw a statewide celebration with several events sponsored by the state legislature and various community organizations. Since most Filipinos came to Hawaii as contract laborers for the sugar and pineapple plantations, it was decided that "*Ti Mangyuna*" would depict that almost forgotten history of the Filipinos' role in building Hawaii and its labor movement, which fought the racism and economic injustice of the plantation system. The production had a multiracial, but mostly Filipino, cast. Our Hawaiian choreographer used Hawaiian as well as modern and other dance movements. The dialogue was in English but spiced with a lot of Ilocano and Hawaiian pidgin.

Audiences responded with great enthusiasm throughout Sining Bayan's entire Hawaii tour. It is a well-known fact that every local family in Hawaii can trace a part of its roots to the plantation experience. So, it was not surprising that many, many families offered to be our hosts, housing and feeding us as well as holding festive receptions and luaus during our stay. On the island of Kauai, the community provided us with cots in a recreation hall. On Maui, our hosts sheltered us in a big, dark, haunted-looking lodge at a state park. We were rather afraid to go to sleep, so we stayed outdoors as late as possible into the night with a huge campfire glowing while we sang, "talked story," played cards or ran around the trees playing tag. When we performed on the Big Island in Naalehu and Honokaa, the ILWU members working at a newly opened tourist hotel in nearby Hilo, got us rooms at a big discount. Some of Sining Bayan's members had never slept in a hotel before, let alone a nice one. Moy, one of our actors, had grown up in the slums of

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<sup>6</sup> *Ti Mangyuna* was also the Ilocano language edition of the *Honolulu Record*, a left-wing newspaper published during the 1940s and 1950s.

Manila. Another actor, Pio, was a college student who lived all his life back on Oahu's north shore in old company housing on the Waialua Sugar plantation.

And now here we all were at the end of our tour, on tiny Lanai. The only accommodations the community could hustle up for a troupe of troubadours was--get this--the former plantation manager's residence. It was a real charmer: large, splendid and set in a lovely garden on top of a hill. We whooped with delight and enjoyed the irony.

