

War and Politics: an artist's perspective

Olivia J. Quinto, Nov 16, 2004



Actress and playwright May Nazareno tells Philippine News New York correspondent Olivia J. Quinto how she comes full circle with her critically-acclaimed 'Dead Woman Home'

SHAKESPEARE is a long way off from a bombing in Baghdad, but Filipino American actress and playwright May Nazareno, known primarily for her work as Viola from "Twelfth Night" at the 13th Seattle Fringe Festival, did not shy away from the politically controversial when she wrote "Dead Woman Home" – a timely and inspiring multi-media solo play based on the true story of a Filipina United Nations aide worker reported dead during the August 2003 bombing of the organization's headquarters in Iraq.

Straddling two worlds – New York and Baghdad – "Dead Woman Home" focuses on the family of Marilyn Manuel, the Filipina UN aide, as they reel from the tragic news of her "death." It is through them – most effectively through Marilyn's son Rick and her elderly mother "Lola" – that Nazareno

attempts to examine the unseen human toll of war.

The terrorist attack ultimately took the lives of 21 UN staff members who were working for the organization's peacekeeping operations – one of which was Sergio Vieira de Mello, the UN high commissioner for human rights who was serving as the UN secretary-general's special representative in Iraq.

The bombing forced the organization to leave the country, and the events surrounding that decision is examined in the play. But, ultimately, this poignant piece serves to question the lack of a human face in today's sound bite-driven coverage of conflicts.

Critically acclaimed with sold-out performances in New York and Seattle, "Dead Woman Home" is also Nazareno's first production as founder of the Pamana Theatre Project, a theater company that aims to "inspire civic dialogue challenging audiences to re-evaluate the events that shape them." "Pamana" is Tagalog for "legacy" and Nazareno got her inspiration to form the company from the Pamana Group – an association organized in the '70s by young Filipino men and women in New York City that supported Filipino artists and activists who were silenced by the Marcos regime and sent to exile.

And in a seemingly fitting tribute to those artists, Nazareno has been invited to do a play reading at the Philippine National Theatre Festival on November 19 at the Cultural Center of the Philippines.

What makes her most happy about this event is that her performance will be open to the public, making it accessible to communities who cannot afford to see Theatre.

As Nazareno pointed out, "sharing this play to communities who do not have the financial means to afford Theatre is central to my work." Excerpts of the interview:

PN: What inspired you to write this play? What did you want to convey in your story?

MN: [I wanted to share] a story that broke away from the walk-on stereotypes mainstream media glorifies as 'the Filipino.' I wanted to share with audiences a [the story of a] family that was internationally aware and stands a selfless reminder to act on one's vocation. During the interview, what I found so inspiring is Mrs. Manuel's deep commitment to the ideals of the UN and their humanitarian work.

I [also] wanted to understand how information travels, how perceptions are shaped and then grounded into fact, and how a family deals with loss. I also wanted to understand what it means to be a Filipino. I grew up in Manhattan in a predominantly Jewish and LGBT (lesbian, gay bisexual, transgender) neighborhood and now I live in Seattle.

Despite the fact that Seattle proper has a 14-percent APA (Asian Pacific American) population, I felt lost, out of place, and I recognized that I had a vague understanding of what it means to be a Filipino living in America.

Anna Deavere Smith, the solo artist, once wrote: "If you say a word long enough, it becomes you." I thought that if I embodied the words of Filipinos who each have a broad range of experiences in terms of assimilation into the U.S. and other countries, I could learn something about my identity.

PN: What kind of challenges did you face in writing 'Dead Woman Home'?

MN: This play is written by weaving interviews with public documents and my imagination. A lot of the research involved reading news-reporter journals, war commentaries, watching footage of the UN bombing and news reports, and listening to radio-broadcasts.

It was important for me to learn how people said words. I discovered that there is a natural musicality in a person's speech. In every interview and broadcast that I heard, I wrote the play based on how each person used their distinctive rhythm and pronunciation to speak words.

This is my first play and solo show – doing play-readings proved to be a valuable experience. I learned that what touches people the most are not the political analyses, but those experiences where audience themselves can relate to. People who come to the theatre come to empathize. They want to feel and I realized that I needed to write a play that made them live in the shoes of this family.

PN: In the play, you act out five different characters, ranging from Marilyn Manuel's son Rick to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, why do a one-woman show?

MN: Performing this solo has given me a subtler understanding of what it means for me to be Filipino and a woman. I see parts of me in these people, and I see parts of these people in me and I am always in awe.

If I had cast this play with several other actors, I would not have had the visceral experience to realize that race and gender truly are fluid entities that exist as a means to define the other.

PN: How is the play personal to you?

MN: I came to Seattle on Sept. 5, 2001, six days before 9/11. I was staying at a youth hostel and living off of four duffle bags. All I could think about was trying to find a job and a permanent place to stay. When 9/11 hit, I took two days to grieve and then I went back to my life as scheduled.

My Dad used to work at the (World) Trade Center. I spent most of my childhood there. I had friends who worked there and when 9/11 hit, I didn't want to look them up.

With the news of Marilyn, I realized that for the last two years, I had been denying to myself that we were in a full-blown war. I wrote this play in a response to my denial and to [demonstrate] that I am not alone in that ugly and deceitful habit.

PN: What has been the audience's reaction?

MN: There have been two specific audience reactions. Audience members either slowly get out [of] their seats and mutter to me that they need to process the play or they sit there almost frozen. I usually trust my own assessment of the show by sensing if the audience is present with me during the performance.

I've been very grateful to see so many audience members journey with me through this play. I've seen audiences cry, laugh, and cheer for the characters.

To me, what matters most is if the audience is touched by the story — and when they are, I know I did my job.

PN: The play focuses on the role of the media, why?

MN: We live in a time filled with agendas and subliminal messages that can build barriers between ethnic and religious communities. I build bridges of discussion and understanding by questioning the information we receive.

So many talented men and women died that August 19, like the thousands of men and women who died on September 11. What's the cycle that perpetuates these attacks and how can our own acts break that pattern? I felt that the mainstream media never asked those questions.

Through my research, I realized that what mattered to most mainstream media was getting the most sensational story. Questions that open other sides of the issue destroy sensationalism and give other dimensions to what is regarded as "reality".

I wonder what would Iraq and the United States look like today if reporters demanded that President [George W.] Bush published actual reports on Saddam Hussein's "weapons of mass destruction" rather than giving lip-service to his "war on terror"?

If in 2003, reporters asked questions that demanded straightforward answers from the Bush Administration about their credibility, their professionalism, and their logic about their policies in Iraq, and if news corporations actually aired the Bush Administration's contradictions and gave commentary to those contradictions – would we still be in this war and would Bush still be in the White House?

PN: What do you think about the events surrounding Iraq and America's role in it?

MN: I have been a staunch supporter against the war since the beginning. It was never made clear to me why we had to go to war and why we choose to stay despite the incalculable loss of lives on both the Allies and Iraqis.

How are U.S. policies in Iraq actually defining "democracy" and why does that definition include the presence of corporations like Halliburton and the Carlyle Group?

In terms of the "war on terrorism," the word "terrorist" is a label that has been grossly abused to pertain to anyone who dares to question the authority of the Bush Administration. The fact that some Democrat or even moderate Republican officials are branded as "terrorists," makes me realize how fragile our Constitutional rights are.

We [Americans] need to be the first ones to act out of humility toward those communities and countries where we are despised for our arrogance and greed. And the first step toward humility is acting in accord with the laws set forth by the UN.

Also, we have the resources to do conflict resolution and mediation. We have so many scholars, activists, and artists whom we can learn from to bring forth more humane solutions about the conflicts in the Middle East.

We need to be the first ones to bring about a genuine form of peace that does not include developing that country to look like some suburb in Ohio!

PN: How do you think art and politics mix? Can and should one promote the other?

MN: I think most people think of the word "political" as that which is subversive or left leaning. The truth is the word "politics" means that which reflects the entire people. Politics speaks to the customs, laws and morals of the people, so in my mind whatever anyone creates is by default reflective of the customs, laws, and morals of the people.

You cannot distinguish between "art" and "politics" – they mirror each other. As an artist, one of the things that are important to me about this play is that I didn't want to give people answers to what happened to the UN workers on Aug. 19, 2003. I wanted audiences to come up with conclusions themselves.

I just wanted to provide the questions.

May Nazareno trained with the Ensemble Training Intensive where she received the Freehold Studio/Theatre Lab Diversity Scholarship. Her other credits include the sentry in "Antigone" and "Just So Stories" and "Alice in Wonderland" at the Berkshire Theatre Festival.

"Dead Woman Home" is her first play and solo show, directed by Teresa Thuman with video design by Mark Ramquist and original music composed by Blair Jensen. It was developed as part of the Theatre Babylon's Play Development Program.

For booking information and upcoming performances, visit www.deadwomanhome.com.