

# Liza C. Magtoto

## Sea Breeze

### Visiting the Visayas with Two Plays

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with toddlers clinging  
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"I don't know where I'm going, but I can't wait till I get there." A character said that in a movie I saw in the 80s. I feel too old to be quoting from popular movies but this line has stuck with me like flytrap paper. Maybe because it is true. I am often plagued with questions about the uncertainties of my work, my writing and my life in general. But in spite of that, I anticipate the discovery and seize the exhilaration that accompanies the journey.

My work entails a bit of travelling. I can't say I travel a lot, but when I do I also carry that sense of anticipation. Anticipating the familiar and the unknown, you reach a place and the familiar greets you with warmth and comfort, and the unknown becomes an adventure and a series of surprise attacks. Strangers welcome you with open arms, then you learn to embrace the unfamiliar and say "yes" to what it offers.

There are so many things about my country that I have yet to know - its diverse landscapes, culture, and languages. They are the unfamiliar that I want to explore.

Going around the country means travelling by different means - we have the jeepney, skylab (motorcycle with a wooden plank to seat other passengers), the tricycle (much like Thailand's *tuktuk*), pedicab (a bicycle attached to a sidecar for passengers), and the conventional bus, boat and plane. It can mean eating on the run at the harbour or tasting the best seafood meal in their area.

I couldn't forget one of our journeys by sea. We were enclosed, which I didn't like, because I prefer to breathe in the sea breeze. Unfortunately, we were shut in an air-conditioned speedboat, the raging sea striking its mighty waves at us. We were in for a two-hour roller-coaster ride on water. The dizzying ride felt as if it would never end. When it finally did, I thought about why we had to endure something like that, and for what?

So when I recently went to the Visayas, a major group of islands in the midsection of the Philippines, I prepared myself for boat rides. I was there to observe the audience's



A scene from *Libby Manaoag Files*

feedback on the play I wrote which our theatre group was touring.

Our theatre group, PETA (Philippine Educational Theater Association), has been touring, bringing *Libby Manaoag Files* to different parts of the country. Libby Manaoag (pronounced Ma-na-wag) is a fictitious character who is on the trail of missing chopped-up female body parts. The play is actually a bizarre comic take on husbands and wives, health care for mothers with many kids, single mums, experimenting teens, women with AIDS, and how government and society take care of them, neglect them or ostracise them. Being in a nation steeped in Catholic dogma, reproductive rights is a controversial topic to brandish about.

When we went to Ormoc, a province in the Visayas, we were constantly reminded of the invisible war between the church and promoters of women's rights. The people from the local media told us that some of the religious people refused to support the show because they thought it would promote abortion or artificial birth control. I am quite

familiar with the word war, but I was not familiar with the people of Ormoc, so I anticipated the best and the worst reaction from them.

I hardly had any idea about Ormoc except for the great flash flood that hit its city in the early 90s, leaving 8,000 dead and missing. They said that when the flood subsided, the city streets were literally so cluttered with corpses that people had to walk on them - eerie and tragic. Before I went there I also saw a television documentary on the Ormoc child workers. Children still in their third grade carry the heavy task of cutting the sharp leaves in the sugar plantation. I thought, how scarred these people might be, and yet I thought that their spirit for survival must be so strong.

Now the city doesn't seem to show evidence of the tragedy. Bridges were built, trees were replanted, buildings were constructed. But by chance I saw a truckload of people who came to the town centre to bathe in the sea. They were sugar workers, and some were in their early teens, perhaps

younger, aged by hard work. I invited them to the show, but they had to get back to the fields. Life is hard. I couldn't comprehend the other things they said, and I wished I knew more of their language! Still, I felt a brief moment of warm exchange through smiles, gestures and the little I know of their mother tongue.

At the main road in Ormoc, I could see this common vehicle which would pass as a jeepney, but which they called the multi-cab. Painted on the multi-cabs are points of destination - Bliss, Bagong Buhay (New Life), Puertobella (Beautiful Port). It is like wish fulfilment. You go to a place which you hope lives up to its name.

In 1999, when we were on tour with *Tumawag Kay Libby Manaoag* (Call Libby Manaoag), a play which used the same character to weave stories of women caught in domestic violence, we went to a place in Malabon called Paradise Village. We were greeted by wet and narrow streets, and the smell of fish sauce, Malabon's major enterprise. We performed at an open-air multi-purpose community plaza more often used for basketball games, dance parties and street fights. Our director, Maribel Legarda, noted that our would-be stage was small, "perhaps four tombstones combined". Quite ominous, considering that women would tell us, "My husband and I vowed to be together 'till death do us part'. But I didn't think it meant being battered to death." I pondered on the meaning of paradise for these people.

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I was acting in the play then and because our backstage was just a metre away from the audience, I could hear the women in the

audience exclaiming, "Fetch the others! They should see this!" A combination of nervous laughter and sisterly banter permeated the air when the scenes about the battered wife were shown.

But this year we are touring a play which may not be as well-accepted as the previous one which tackled violence against women, something that everyone thinks must be stopped. But women making choices about their bodies? I could hear myself breathing nervous laughter just before the open forum, where the nuns were present.

After every show, we would have an open forum or debriefing workshop. We would ask the audience to stay and give comments, raise some issues to discuss with us and among themselves.

During the open forum in Ormoc, a woman found the courage to ask if contraception was the right way of planning one's family. A man blocked her from pursuing the topic, noting the presence of nuns in the forum. After a brief debate about whether they should talk about this or not, one of the nuns stood up and addressed another concern which had been causing anxiety for some of us. The nun said that while she was watching the play, she did not even think if it was "pro-life", "pro-choice" or what. She said that the performance opened the minds of the audience who are left to decide for themselves. Now, that felt like a warm embrace from a stranger. "Yes!" I told myself, cheering for this liberal-minded nun and everyone who dared talk out loud about what was usually said in whispers.

I was pleasantly surprised by the extended discussion that happened the next day, when we came from an excursion in Lake Danao, Ormoc. It was raining hard and we huddled up close and squeezed to fit in the multi-cab. We passed by a public school where teachers and students were walking on their way home. The driver stopped and

let some of the teachers ride with us. With no seats available in the multi-cab, the teachers sat on each other's laps. We did the same thing. The fun part was when they found out that we were from PETA. The young teachers started talking about the play, which in turn made them talk about the restrictions they felt as women while they were still students. There was instant camaraderie as stories were exchanged. They talked about the strict nuns who reprimanded the students who wore black brasieres, as these were deemed seductive. I was aghast at the story about the college administrators who required students to take pregnancy tests before they could graduate.

The way they talked was as if they were finally divulging something that had been stifled for a long time. There was something powerful about it - like a weapon to place shame on those who did not respect their rights. I soon realised that it was not just PETA who brought them a play, but they, too, were giving us so much about themselves which we took with us when we went back home.

Some of these "take-outs" left an indelible mark in our memories. In one workshop, a woman complained to us about her husband who used to beat her black and blue. Exasperated, she finally told him: "You like going out even if you have nothing in your pocket. I don't eat anything but salt, and still you have the gall to hit me! If I could only pawn your manhood!" Eventually, the lines found their way in our play. (Unfortunately so much is lost in the translation!)

It is surprising how minds speak; how women jump out of enclosed spaces to stretch the limits that box them in. Their words surprised me as unknown deeds accumulated to become frighteningly familiar. Despite the differences in landscape, language and culture, women collectively

share a narrative about their lives.

But the uncommon brought us a sense of hope. Enlightened men talked during these workshops and confessed that they were once insensitive to their wives' burden. One of them even said, "We should help them when they do their laundry" (generally, laundry is done manually and mostly by women). "Laundry work causes a lot of back pain!" the man added. We met more of these men in our recent tour. We also met more women and men who are willing to work together to protect women's rights.

In a way, I am glad we are part of the process of making these people examine their lives and talk among themselves. For once they do, solutions are not far behind. Sometimes talk can just go on, and you don't know where it is going. But while we can't wait to get there, we can only hope that the destination - the real Bliss, Bagong Buhay, Puertobella, or Paradise Village - is something better. That the journey from here to there, despite the dizzying ride, is worth the taking.

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