Book Review

Places for Happiness: Community, Self, and Performance in the Philippines by William Peterson (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016)

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When Clifford Geertz famously touted "thick description" as the basis of ethnographic inquiry, he concluded that the central task of the researcher is "the enlargement of the universe of human discourse" and "to reduce the puzzlement … to which unfamiliar acts emerging out of unknown backgrounds naturally give rise" (Geertz 1973, 14; 16). This sets the bar high (and Geertz acknowledges the essentially incomplete, provisional nature of his own anthropological interpretations) but it still seems to me an appropriate ambition for any performance research that is grounded in an ethnographic approach. Certainly, it's a benchmark against which William Peterson's study of community-based performances in the Philippines ranks very highly. Drawing on more than a decade of participant-observation fieldwork experiences in Metro Manila, Marinduque and other locations, Peterson offers detailed accounts of large-scale Easter processions and Passion Play performances, of highly choreographed, mass participation forms of street dancing, and of satirical performances in connection with election campaigns. Throughout the book, his focus is on explaining "[h]ow an individual Filipino's need for happiness is met through involvement in localized performance practices that link them to a community and that in turn provide a shared, foundational identity for both the individual and community" (2).

Peterson is highly attuned to the challenge of framing his study for readers who (myself included) have no direct experience of the complex politics and rich performance culture of the Philippines. It is more than thirty years since the regime of Ferdinand Marcos collapsed before the moral authority of a massive "People Power Revolution" (I remember walking around the streets of Sydney with a transistor radio glued to my ear, listening to the ABC's coverage of those momentous events) yet the violence, corruption and poverty once associated with martial law appear to have largely continued under a system of "*comprador* capitalism" presided over by the country's most powerful family dynasties. To the extent that this bleak assessment holds, it might also explain why, for theatre and performance scholars working outside the Philippines, the best-known point of reference

remains the Philippines Educational Theatre Association (PETA) and the consciousness-raising agenda of its grassroots "cultural action" projects during the 1980s.

Not only does Peterson's book do the work of opening up for readers an impressively wide array of performance genres beyond the well-documented work of PETA; it also moves us outside the default frame of seeing all Filipino performance as a form of political activism, however displaced. The book divides roughly into two equal halves: three chapters on the staging of Passion Plays in varying contexts, followed by three chapters on various forms of folk-inflected dancing. Framing these are a well-theorised introduction and, almost as a coda, a case study devoted to Mae Paner, a former associate of PETA, whose contemporary social activism is performed via her alter-ego "Juana Change". To be sure, the performances that Peterson describes and analyses throughout the book are all still thoroughly imbricated with the politics of the places and times in which they occur but his persistent emphasis on what these performances do at the level of embodied affect—the pursuit of individual and communal happiness that they facilitate—takes us beyond any simple, mechanistic application of Victor Turner's concept of "social drama" which (as interpreted by Richard Schechner) would bluntly emphasise the pursuit of "political efficacy" above all else.

Peterson does draw on Turner's work but it is mostly the phenomenological aspects of his ritual theory (Turner's evocative accounts of *communitas* and his borrowings from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's analysis of "flow" states) that are called upon. Further informing Peterson's attempts to get at the phenomenology of these community-based Filipino performances are the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Edward Casey concerning embodiment, place and memory. And, not surprisingly, Peterson also leans on Diana Taylor's elegant theorising of the tension between the "archive" (where, broadly speaking, there is an attempt to lock down meanings in the form of texts) and the "repertoire" (where meanings are circulated through shared, embodied practices). Taylor's framework is most deftly applied in the analysis of the Passion Play performances which are revealed as a dynamic engagement with "scenarios" that are not nearly as fixed as one might presume.

However, the most engaging features of the necessarily eclectic theoretical framework that Peterson has adopted are often to be found in his borrowings from Filipino scholars (principally, the work of psychologist, Virgilio Enriquez, and, the sociologist, F. Landa Locano) that underpin his careful attention to culturally-specific understandings of self, community and place. He writes evocatively of how one's sense of self is negotiated with others through the balancing of internal states (*sa loób*) and external manifestation (*sa labas*) in the moment of performance. And he reveals how performances are the occasion for not simply expressing but rather embodying, and perhaps interrogating, one's relationship to *bayan*—a sense of place and connectedness that operates on all levels, from the local and regional, to the national and diasporic Filipino "community", as these are both lived and imagined.

Having sketched out much of this framework in his introduction, Peterson devotes the next three chapters—the first half of the book—to a fascinating comparative study of Passion Play (*sinakulo*) performances in three different Tagalog-speaking community contexts. The

source material for these *sinakulos* goes well beyond the standard gospel versions of the Last Supper, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection to include apocryphal accounts of the story of Longinus, the Roman soldier who is supposed to have converted spontaneously to Christianity after spearing Jesus on the cross, and also a popular Tagalog version which sets the events of the Passion within "the entire history of salvation going back to the creation" (23). Add to this the legacy of pre-Christian forms of chanted lamentation, the continuing influence of popular 19th century traditions such as the melodramatic *komedya*, and the contemporary enthusiasm for blockbuster Hollywood representations (such as Jim Caviezel's portrayal of an eminently "hot" Christ in the Mel Gibson film) and it becomes easier to appreciate just how diverse the experience of a *sinakulo* can be.

Peterson provides a typology that ranges from "traditional" community-based performances, through the lavish "civic" spectacles sponsored by a patently self-interested political elite, and on to a more "activist" theatrical version but these categories are deliberately loose as first impressions can be deceiving. The traditional *sinakulo* turns out to be less a matter of honouring a script and staging that haven't changed since the 1960s than a question of recognising family members who've taken up the roles played by deceased ancestors. There are moments during the civic *sinakulo* that provoke laughter and cynicism from those standing "in the pit" while other moments, in which participants are able to move more freely and unpredictably, are rapturously received. The "activist" *sinakulo* appears to be not so much a new invention as the recovery of a militant interpretation of the Christ story that influenced popular uprisings against the Spanish and early American colonial authorities.

For the outsider looking in, the phantasmagoria of Easter Week performances in the Philippines is often represented as some kind of inexplicable mash-up of kitsch fancy-dress parades and gruesome body art—I'm thinking of the pictures of devotees having themselves nailed to the cross that seem to pop up every Easter in the weekend travel supplement of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, a ritual which (as Peterson reminds us) the Australian satirist John Safran once participated in for the sake of a few hard-earned laughs. One of the great strengths of the case studies in this book is the extent to which Peterson's analyses resolve this apparent tension between glitz and gore. Set against the grinding poverty and continuing oppression experienced by most Filipinos living in the neighbourhoods where these performances occur, the opportunity to come together as a community to re-create the flamboyant costumes, to re-learn the steps performed by previous generations, to watch, once more, the larger-than-life performances mimed to a soundtrack cribbed, perhaps, from a Cecil B. DeMille film… who wouldn't want to get involved in some way? (I'm reminded here of the argument made by John MacAloon in relation to the Olympics as a ramified performance type, a "meta-genre" in which the vast spectacle that frames the events can also become a recruitment device leading participants towards deeper levels of engagement with the underlying frames of festival, ritual and game.) Likewise, in relation to ritual practices of *panata* that some participants take on, such as the act of having oneself nailed, or lashed, to a cross, we come to understand that these are not some whacky form of "penance" (a zealot's desire to be scourged of sin) but rather the fulfilment of all sorts of different vows through which vital family and community links are maintained.

The second half of the book concentrates on various forms of "folk-inflected" dance, including regional and national dance festivals in which large ensembles compete with one another in choreographed displays of a kind of turbo-charged "street-dancing" meets "line-dancing". I found the case studies in Chapters Four through Six more diffuse than the earlier discussion of Easter Week performances and not always as satisfying—for one thing, the framing of some of these dance activities as a mode of ritual action is not entirely persuasive—but there is an important connecting thread that links the two parts of the book. The interrogation of what passes for "tradition" in all of these performance genres is a constant. For instance, the attempts by local authorities to "clean up" the Easter Week parades of *moriones* (performers in full face-masks and fake armour who parade around the streets in the guise of Roman legionaries—a tradition which once gave poorer folk the opportunity to rampage through the homes of wealthier people) are mirrored in Chapter Four's discussion of how the Bayanihan Philippine National Folk Dance Company refashioned "traditional" folk dances from minority cultural groups in order to promote a carefully curated image of national unity.

Again, Peterson's analysis is well nuanced. On the one hand, undoubtedly, the international tours of this flagship dance company represented a form of what we would now call "soft diplomacy" and the conservative ideology of multicultural tolerance that seems to have underpinned their performances—the syrupy Aussie ballad "we are one but we are many" was the unwelcome ear-worm that played in my mind as I was reading Chapter Four—would have fitted in well with the Marcos regime's famous efforts to help lock in the popular vote through lavish displays of cleaned-up popular culture. On the other hand, as with all the genres of popular performance that Peterson discusses, elite efforts to control what, and how, the act of dancing or gathering in public places can mean are never entirely successful. If there is a take-home message from Peterson's book, this is probably it: "Political authorities and power elites will continually and repeatedly stake a claim in any and all events such as these, particularly those where local culture and religious ritual come together in a festival context. Rather than using this as further evidence of a broken and corrupt political system, it is more useful to consider what it is about community-based performance in the Philippines that makes these interventions a political necessity" (97).

In short, Peterson constantly reaffirms the agency of the people who are performing the very public movements of these dances, parades and other genres. They will be the target of attempted manipulation by the elites—and they will be let down by popularly anointed saviours such as the would-be reformist Presidents "Cory" Aquino and her son "Noynoy"—but there is such an excess of hope, joy and desire embodied in their performances that the potential of another "People Power" moment can never be discounted. As an ethnographer, Peterson has spent enough time mingling with, and interviewing, members of the political and cultural elite (including some wonderfully incisive critics of endemic state, corporate and military corruption) but it is, above all, his willingness to move with the people—literally, to get down in the streets and dance among the locals until the point of exhaustion—that drives the arguments of this fine book.

Works Cited

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.

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