

Carlo Laurena

Statement on process at Can Serrat

Self-translation for Filipino writers is a fraught practice. Especially when the original text has to be transferred into the mold of a more privileged language. And not just in the case of translation into English, but for example, from a more peripheral, regional language to a more dominant tongue such as Tagalog. Translation, not just in the strict sense of the linguistic but also in a wider sense of semiotic transfer between for example different art forms, has always been integral to my work. While it is certainly challenging, it is not as restrictive and reductive as most people make it out to be.

Critics say that among the genres of Philippine literature in English, literary production of English-language drama pales in comparison to that of fiction, poetry, and the essay. Filipino playwrights who prefer English as their medium always grapple with the question of verisimilitude. Most playwrights in Filipino install hierarchy into their plays by having characters switch from Tagalog to English, an elite language. The risk of erasing nuances, the anxiety to sound “natural” (which for others means, to sound American) often weigh upon the playwright’s conscience.

Yet in an era of diaspora and globalization, English has become the tongue of an underprivileged class whisked off to other corners of the earth. English, a colonial language, before whose diphthongs and twangs the Filipino tongue used to cower, is slowly escaping the monopoly of the insular elite. Like the fetus-sucking tongue of Southeast Asian vampires, English is seized from its colonial, elitist womb, and emerges ugly, bloodied, deformed, for common consumption.

At Can Serrat, I’ve embarked on the task of translating a one-act play I had written in Tagalog into English, for consideration at the 19th season of the Virgin Laboratory Festival held in Manila. The original play titled *Cielo Azul* has now become *Sprechgesang*, referring to composer Arnold Schoenberg’s *sprechgesang* and *sprechstimme* technique. Being surrounded by Anglophones from all over the world at Can Serrat, the task did not only entail communicating the original meaning of the text—a cry for art, beauty, unconditional love in a world of tragedy and selfishness—but also occupying a particular register in the language, preserving the inherent musicality, cadence of Tagalog, allowing characters to speak both in vulgar and heightened language, without disregarding their existential specificities.

I’ve attached the final monologue of E, the escort, whom C hires and manipulates into watching a suicide staged like an operatic death. The reversal of the play—a trope in most operas—allows E to take center-stage and perform an aria in speech. E’s heightened language is problematic; critics may argue that it is unrealistic for a fisherman-turned-escort to speak this way. I found that in the original Tagalog I felt compelled to make him a comic

character, cracking jokes and puns... but the subject—opera—becomes my *carte blanche*. He does not necessarily speak in English (that is, diegetically). He speaks in translation, like a French courtesan singing in Italian, and most importantly, he speaks in melodies, leitmotifs, images, colors all rooted in his memories and experiences. This I found a way to redeem characters often disadvantaged by being assigned such prosaic registers, devoid of poetry or complexity, condemned as unnatural and too ornamental for the “uneducated” class. By thinking in and from translation, we encounter more and more possibilities of communicating our meaning and our histories not only to new and foreign audiences, but most importantly, to ourselves.

an excerpt from *SPRECHGESANG*
a one-act play by Carlo Laurena

E

A vast, blue sea perhaps.

E grabs the pills from the nightstand and shows them to C.

I'm ready for the final scene, son.

The piano from afar crescendoes, now as powerful as an orchestra. When E says "son" in the previous line, the dissonant chords of a Straussian passage immediately crash. Music similar to the recognition scene in Strauss' Elektra, when Orest is revealed to be alive. The frenzied dissonance at the beginning melts away and resolves into a tender and lyrical melody.

E leads C to the window. E and C kiss, embrace, as they gaze at the sea. E holds on to the pills.

Then E recites the following, sprechgesang-style. Simultaneously, a teary-eyed C opens his mouth, moves his lips as if performing an aria, but we only hear E's voice—in the twilight of song and speech.

E

Your voice is so beautiful, son. It's like you speak to me as you sing, and when you speak, you sing unknowingly.

C is lost in the aria, E, holds on to the pills, like a weapon he's about to wield. E paces, moving around upstage, speaking to himself while looking at the window and beholding C's performance.

In this scene what am I? A spectator? But I watch you, I listen, and I don't understand a single word. How does the scene go? Am I your companion? Am I a lover mourning a corpse? Are you my enemy, am I to die by your sword? What role must I play, son?

Maybe it's best that I can't understand. The music takes me and I hear blue, all blue, blue skies bleeding into blue seas, and I sail across a giant mirror, far from the city and its concrete, its stench, its lack of mercy.

I'm on my way back, son. I row—left, right, left, right—rowing and pushing against the current of the years. The sun sears my back as before and what is that I taste? Yes, salt on my tongue. Nothing stirs on the surface today, the fish hide in their reefs. But there! There in the horizon! I see my island. I see our town. And I cast my widest trawl, as far as possible, to catch it, stop it from getting away!

C is utterly consumed by the aria. E heads back downstage and holds C as he continues to 'sing'. The music crescendoes.

There, there my son is waiting for me! But the sea curdles blood-thick and my wrists grow weak and tired. I can't move. I'm taken back to the city and its alleys. I see my son lurking with a blade, waiting around the corner. And his eyes, red as his mother's favorite *kadyos*.

E looks at the money on the bed. E looks at the pills in his hand. E turns C's face towards him.

What do I see? Revenge? Murder? No, I see only myself. Father becomes son and he becomes me. He becomes who else but the fool who sired him. I am the ugly face of his anger. He is the handsome face of my debt. Tonight, I settle my debt. Tonight, from each other I set us free.

C turns his face away from E as he reaches the climax of his aria. E steps back. He looks at the money, then at the pills. A beat. He begins to clap and cheer for C.

Then suddenly, upstage, he takes all the pills with the rest of the wine. He turns towards C, cheers, claps, laughs even more hysterically.

Sing, son, keep singing! You are free, alive, extraordinary. Bravo, bravo!

Decrescendo, ritardando. E appears dizzy. He heads to the bathroom. C turns around and sees the empty bottles of pills on the floor. A loud thud is heard. C rushes to the bathroom, he lets out a bloodcurdling shriek. Straussian, dissonant chords thunder and crash upon the stage.

CURTAIN