

# Collaboratively Translating *Katwiran*

A Note on *Reason Has its Reason*,  
an English translation of Rolando S. Tinio's  
*May Katwiran ang Katwiran*

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**Ricardo Abad**

Ateneo de Manila University

**Josemaria Ecequiel “Cholo” N. Ledesma**

Ateneo de Manila University

**Gabriel Tolentino**

De La Salle University

## Abstract

This preamble gives an account of how a director and two actors collaborated in translating Rolando S. Tinio's *May Katwiran Ang Katwiran* from Filipino to English. Our method was intuitive and inductive, finding the rules of translation as we went along. We first agreed to treat the play as a *Lehrstücke*, or a learning play, the aim of which is to demonstrate a dialectical way of reasoning. This kind of thinking, expressed in arguments and debate, shapes the lines and songs of the play. In turn, actors and audiences must listen to the arguments or reasons, assess them, and make a conclusion rather than engage emotionally with the lines. This “objective” intention of the play, coupled with an appreciation of its cultural context, guide the translation. We chose not to follow any

translation theory and instead asked three questions: Does the English translation convey the general Filipino meaning? Does it make sense in English? Does it work on stage? A yes answer to all three questions meant that the translation was workable. Some remarks on the reception of the play in an international theater festival in Yogyakarta, Indonesia conclude the essay.

### **Keywords**

*May Katwiran Ang Katwiran*, Rolando S. Tinio, *Lehrstücke*, Filipino-English Translation, Asia-Pacific Bond of Theater Schools, Filipino play, Brechtian approach, Ricardo Abad, Cholo Ledesma, Gabriel Tolentino

## Background

We staged *Reason Has Its Reason*, an English translation of Rolando S. Tinio's *May Katwiran ang Katwiran*,<sup>1</sup> for the 11th Asia-Pacific Bond of Theater Schools (APB) Theater Festival and Directors' Meeting, held in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in September 2018. The APB, founded in 2006, is a consortium of 27 theater schools from 19 countries in the region. The Ateneo de Manila University became a member in 2007.

We thought that showing a critically acclaimed and widely performed Filipino play would give APB member schools, notably its faculty and student delegates, a glimpse of Filipino cultural realities through drama—in this case, a study of the relationship between the poor and the rich, and more concretely, the relationship between the tenant and his landlord. Because we were performing for an international audience, and because *Katwiran* makes debate as its central motif, we reasoned that audiences would better appreciate the play in English. We considered, too, that some of the delegates, notably students who were not too conversant in English, would benefit from seeing English subtitles shown on stage during the actual performance. We decided to do so, however, only for the songs and for reasons of stagecraft: the lights could be dimmed, the lines would flash, and we can cue the audience that a shift in the play's action has taken place (see next page).

Rolando Tinio has an English version that he himself wrote. Or so we believed. We looked everywhere but could not find a copy. We thus decided, boldly, to do the translation ourselves—a collaborative translation between the director (Abad) and two actors (Ledesma and Tolentino).

## A Sense of the Play

Central and crucial to this translation process was getting a sense of what the play was all about in terms of narrative, structure, and intent. Here is what we summoned.

*May Katwiran ang Katwiran* falls in the tradition of the *Lehrstücke*, a “lesson play” or “learning play” in German (“*Lehrstücke*”). Didactic in form, the play is associated with Bertolt Brecht whose own *Lehrstücke* took on a political color, the color of Karl Marx. Brecht's aim, however, was not



Fig. 1. The tenant sings about the tribulations of being poor, his voice out of reach from the landlord Both characters on a raft shaped by a light. Notice the English subtitles at the back.

to teach Marxism but to encourage among actors and audiences a kind of dialectical thinking that he hoped would benefit an emerging socialist state (Hughes). No such hopes for a socialist state looms in *Katwiran's* horizons, but the benefits of dialectical (or critical) thinking, would seem to Tinio to be an important disposition to possess among those who wish to debunk an oppressive feudal system.

The characters in a *Lehrstücke* execute critical life-changing decisions. In *Katwiran*, the landlord (Señor), who is fleeing the law for murder, seeks the help of a tenant (Kasama) to go to a far-away spot in the mountains where he can catch a plane that will fly him to safety. The conversations between the landlord and the tenant in the course of this journey is the main action of the play. Their exchange consists mainly of explanations—or reasons. Why, for example, did the characters make the decisions they did? Why did they act in

one way but not in the way they would really like? How did they feel about each other? Why did they feel the need to explain their side to the audience, and sometimes in song?

Most of the time, the actors direct their explanations to each other, and it is in these exchanges that the dialectic of reasons surfaces. Every now and then, however, actors direct their lines (or songs) to the audience when their character desires a personal moment to reflect or to share a thought with the audience. These “informal” or “private” conversations reveal another dialectic, an internal one that operates under the “formal” or “public” dialectic of explanations taking place on the surface. In Scene 5 of *Katwiran*, for example, the landlord tells the audience how difficult it is to deal with tenants whom he sees to be dull, lazy, and opportunistic. He calls the tenant an “animal.” Yet the landlord must hide his “private” feelings in “public” interaction lest the tenant, in the landlord’s estimation, abandon him in the mountains or slay him with the aid of an accomplice.

Actors and audiences must consider informal and formal levels when they listen, assess and for the actors, perform the arguments. Only in this way can they think and act in an “objective” manner. By not siding with anyone, by not letting one’s feelings cloud thoughts, and by focusing on the need to evaluate positions, audiences and actors are able to exercise their critical faculties while watching the play. To achieve this kind of critical appreciation in performance (rather than simply upholding aesthetic targets) is the goal of a learning play. To quote Mueller (1994:84, cited in Hughes 2015: 198), “the *Lehre* is to be understood not as ‘recipes for political action,’ but as the teaching of dialectics as a method of thinking.” (Mueller 198).

Tinio’s version of a *Lehrstücke* is a play about class inequality in the Philippines. It posits that the persistence of this inequality over generations stems from the way people continuously exercise the socially patterned relationship between the rich and the poor. Both are at fault, so to speak, because it is the relationship, not simply individual factors, that embeds class inequality in a society. It is a relationship that manifests itself in language, demeanor, sentiment and thought, all of which comes into play when the

characters explain, in words and song, their positions regarding work, money, obligations, food, faith, trust, and the treatment of others.

### The Actual Translation

How, then, did we actually translate Tinio’s learning play?

We divided the 18 scenes in two parts, with about half going to the director (Abad) and the rest for the two actors (Ledesma and Tolentino) to work on together. Each of us had the task of translating the text from Filipino to English based on our understanding of *Katwiran* as a *Lehrstücke*. At one point, one of us observed that the English translation he was doing resembled the tone of the English appearing in Wilfredo Ma. Guerrero’s plays, i.e., formal and studied, the way Filipinos speak English. That observation made us realize that whether or not we followed Guerrero’s style (and we made no conscious effort to do so), the English text we produced felt “natural” when spoken by Filipinos. The bias coming from our cultural DNA, i.e. being Filipinos translating a play from Filipino to English, helped to assure that our translation becomes “Filipino English”.

We noted this point as we reviewed each other’s drafts and made revisions. We eventually completed a draft of the performance text that Abad reviewed for continuity. Vincent de Jesus, the musical designer and composer, added some changes in the lyrics to align them with the tempo he had in mind. Actors, in turn, memorized the English lines and during rehearsals, added slight changes to produce a more natural delivery. We also simplified some English words to accommodate an international student audience, many of whom do not speak English confidently. The actual performance also yielded improvised words and phrases, some of them in Bahasa Indonesia, but these do not appear in the translation found in this issue.

*Katwiran* is a play with songs, so the text adds poetry to the prose. The prose part contains two sections. The first covers the “formal” or “public” exchanges between the landlord and the tenant as well as the conversations among the landlord, the tenant, and the three rebels. The second section encompasses the character’s “asides,” the “informal” or “private” expressions of personal thoughts that enable a character to explain his actions to

the audience. This breaking of the fourth wall is typical in Brechtian plays. In both prose parts, the language is rational, direct, and more specifically, instrumental since the characters have their own axes to grind in conversation, each one seeking to manipulate the other (or the audience) to satisfy a personal agenda. Both sections of the text also exposes its own dialectic, with the informal section, the substructure so to speak, standing in a dialectical relationship to the superstructure, that is, the formal exchanges between and among the characters.

Part of this “substructure“ is the character’s awareness of his class position and how this position surfaces in body, heart, and mind during social interaction—specifically, in the performance of social interaction. In this cultural context, the landlord will express himself in a superior, snobbish, and confident manner. The tenant, in turn, will be earnest but less direct as his actions and utterances arise largely from a cultural obligation to please the master. The tenant may feel aggrieved, but cannot retaliate with direct force, preferring instead to gripe in private, insult on the side, and mock behavior in humorous ways, acts consistent with what James Scott calls the “weapons of the weak.” Taken all together, and true to the *Lehrstücke*, the play discourages us to sympathize with any of the characters. We should neither romanticize to poor nor ridicule the rich. Rather, the play invites us, as sung in the opening song, to “look, observe, reflect.” and to consider “If the reasons are right/If the reasons are just, and to “Judge for yourself, you must.”

We had to internalize this advice in translating the text, most especially when the translators are also the actors who would enact the text and a director who would guide the performance in the spirit of a learning play. Thus, while we translated these lines literally as a first pass, we heeded to the demands of a dialectic as well as to the socio-cultural context of the original Filipino play in choosing the precise word, phrase, or image. As expected, we could not translate all words and phrases, idiomatic expressions in particular, and in these cases, we sought equivalences, if they were available, or paraphrased the line. Thus, “*mahal na langit!*,” a popular expression, which in the play was also used to allude to the steep price of getting to heaven, could not

be directly translated, and wound up as “Good Heavens!” in the English text. Always, something gets lost in the translation. At other times, we simplified heavy Filipino words in English translation to make the lines more intelligible. This was how *kadiwaraan* in Filipino became “principles” rather than “maxims” or “scruples.” Readings and performances further smoothed the translation, making sure that each actor clearly understood the line so he could react on stage in a truthful (and Brechtian) manner.

The songs, in turn, demanded a poetic or symbolic aspect to the translation. These vocal interludes, also typical of Brechtian plays, served as devices to “alienate” or “distance” the audience from the ongoing action of the performance and to learn something new about the character or the situation at hand. We hear, for example, about the landlord’s need to escape from the law and his plan to murder the tenant at destination. We hear of the tenant’s personal difficulties of serving an arrogant master. And also recognize the amorality of the three rebels in the irreverent way they sing about angels and God.

We translated the poetry of the songs as we did the prose, i.e., as faithfully as possible given an understanding of these interludes in the context of a learning play and in the cultural context of a feudal system. But the constraints on translation were greater. Constraint one: the songs came in rhyme and meter, and these were very difficult to transpose literally into English. We resorted instead to follow a rhythm (and a rhyme scheme if possible) that works in English. The composing genius of our composer, Vincent de Jesus, helped establish that rhythm. Constraint two: we could not always translate the images or idiomatic expressions alluded to in the songs. We again looked for equivalent expressions in English, or chose images that implied, rather than corresponded with, the Filipino. Our rules of thumb were a trio: does the translation convey the general Filipino meaning? Does it make sense in English? Does it work on stage? A yes answer to all three questions meant that the translation is workable.



## Reception

The festival audience in Indonesia received the play very warmly. Staged on a space without a set, but with a rectangle of light serving as a raft (see photo above), a few props, and basic costumes, the production and the performance drew many favorable comments from the international audience. It also generated, quite surprising to us, greater volumes of laughter compared to what we heard when we performed the same English version in the Philippines after the Yogyakarta conference. Incidentally, we also heard less laughter in Filipino versions of the play that we, the translators, have seen or joined in the past.

An immediate explanation might be the degree of alienation produced among audiences in different socio-cultural settings. Watching the production in the Philippines, Filipino audiences would find it hard to laugh, as it would be difficult to disassociate oppressive images of landlord-tenant relationships while watching a play. Filipinos may chuckle at the ironies, the play of words, and the body movements but may feel awkward to respond with greater glee because the topic of the play is very serious and very real.

These cultural associations are virtually absent in the Yogyakarta performance where the audience laughed heartily even in parts of the play that the performers did not find funny. This reflects, we surmise, a greater degree of alienation of the international audience from the socio-cultural moorings of the play. In Yogyakarta, *Reason Has Its Reason* was seen, in our view, as a comic satire of the poor and the rich, thus humorous, but one that, á la Jonathan Swift, has an underlying serious critique. In turn, several members of the audience who have seen a production of *May Katwiran ang Katwiran* and then saw *Reason Has Its Reason* when we restaged it in the Philippines post Yogyakarta remarked that while the English version has an interesting take, they prefer the original Filipino version because it was more relatable to them. We decline to comment further, only to suggest that the English version will produce varying receptions when it is shown abroad with an international audience or when Filipinos, especially those who have viewed or performed in a production using the original text, watch the play.

## **Conclusion**

Translation theories emphasize different aspects of the work (Mathieu). The sociolinguistic approach, for example, suggests that the social context defines what is and is not translatable. The communication model points out that meaning, not language, must be translated. In turn, the literary approach argues that translation is not a linguistic project but a literary one. Moreover, language has a built-in “energy“ that in translation is drawn from the culture itself. We followed none of these approaches strictly, but in hindsight, shades of these three approaches guided our intuition as we worked on Rolando S. Tinio’s brilliant play.

## Notes

1. Tinio, Rolando S. "May Katwiran ang Katwiran," *May Katwiran ang Katwiran at iba Pang Dula*, Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2001.

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