

PANUNULUYAN: A Christmas Drama



KNOCKING ON HEAVEN'S DOOR. The cast of this Panunuluyan in Sta. Rita includes the Narrator, the 3 Kings, a choir of Angels, Shepherds, town children, Jose and Maria, carrying a celluloid doll Jesus. Dated 1924.

In schools all over the country, one of the highlights of Christmas is the dramatization of the birth of our Lord Jesus. On stage, we are treated to charming performances of kids with cotton beards and wings, *paper mache* props, all swathed in colored fabrics taking on the roles of shepherds, kings and angels. The best roles were that of Mary and Joseph's, and the prettiest girl and the meekest boy in class were often chosen for the honor. Always, a plastic baby doll on a hay-strewn manger stood in for the Child Jesus. Back in my elementary school days, when teachers started casting for the roles, I would wish I would land the role of Joseph, which I would have played with aplomb worthy of an Oscar, but, alas, I was too short, so I had to be content being a shepherd, a bit player, destined to blend with the painted scenery the background.

Christmas dramas have always been part of our rich holiday tradition since the Acapulco galleons reached our shores in the early 19th century, bringing the practice of religious theatricals, or *posadas*. These were later modified and transplanted by Spanish friars into provincial parishes, transformed into live street procession-performances known as *Panunuluyan*.

The *Panunuluyan* dramatizes the search for lodging of the Holy Couple, Jose and the very pregnant Maria. Originally, the images of the two, atop decorated *carrozas*, are processioned on Christmas eve and taken from house to house, in re-enactment of that event in Bethlehem. The images are preceded by altar boys bearing *ciriales* (cross and candles on poles) and devotees. Eventually, real people, instead of *santos*, were cast to assume the roles of Jose and Maria, almost always respectable citizens of the town. The *dramatis personae* expanded to include the 3 Magis, Melchor, Gaspar and Baltazar and even a Narrator and a Koro, a Chorus of singers who sang and delivered verses for the Holy Couple.

Four or five houses are selected as “inns”, to be visited by the Holy Couple, who either walked on foot, rode a *gareta* (bull cart) or in some cases, rode the back of a large animal like a carabao or donkey. The yards and balconies were often spruced with Christmas décor like lights and lanterns. At the first house, San Jose begs the “innkeeper” for a room, chanting the verses in octo-syllabic quatrains. The “innkeeper” sings his response, claiming his house is full, thus turning the couple away. The couple moves on to the next house, and then to the next, meeting the same cold response. Finally, the procession winds back to the church plaza, where a stable has been constructed. It is here that Maria delivers Jesus, amidst the ringing of bells and the celebration of a *Misa de Aguinaldo*, the last of the *Simbang Bengi* (nightly Masses).

Biblical dramatizations such as the Panunuluyan often were enacted to teach catechism and caton during the Spanish times. Pampanga too, adopted this seasonal custom, although in this day where religious rites and instructions are broadcast on TV daily, the quaint but colorful Panunuluyan has become a rare sight to see in most Kapampangan towns.

MASAYANG PASKU AT MASAPLALANG BAYUNG BANWA!

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