

The body-scale work of the costumes and the building-scale work of Balete Bulate Bituka fused together into an immersive presence.

Back to that day I first saw *Mebuyan's Vessel* in La Union—I found myself drinking Red Horse and eating balut at a live music bar with JP and Josh, the two Filipino surfers who I credit with having introduced me to New's work. At their encouragement, I went up to sing an acoustic rendition of "Linger" by the Cranberries, sharing the small stage with a massive mural of Bob Marley and the owner of the bar, who played guitar. I thought of the sunset I saw earlier on the beach and all the events and synchronicities that had transpired since, and then back to the silhouette of Mebuyan's bamboo-clad breasts against the sky and sea. This day is one of my favourite memories—a comedy, some sort of tadhana. The beachside world in which this memory was made, across seas and time zones, felt almost within reach again as I walked along the undulating bamboo hachure of Leeroy's *Balete*, a now-familiar sight for me in Toronto.

Bianca Weeko Martin

### ***Prison Dancer: The Musical—A Nod to the Filipino as a World-Class Talent***

*Prison Dancer: The Musical* has all the hallmarks of a hit musical: catchy tunes, perfectly executed choreography, and a storyline that captures the hearts of audiences, regardless of background. The show has the potential to equal or surpass the success of another all-Filipino cast musical, *Here Lies Love*, which premiered on Broadway in 2023.

Since Lea Salonga graced stages worldwide and became famous for starring in *Miss Saigon* in 1989, Filipino artists have followed her path to success. Indeed, the *Prison Dancer's* creators, Carmen Leilani De Jesus and Romeo Candido, played a crucial role in bringing *Miss Saigon* to Canada over thirty years ago as they were both part of the original Toronto cast. Now, De Jesus and Candido are instrumental in turning *Prison Dancer* into a sharp and sophisticated musical, a creative process that took over ten years to complete.

To add depth and authenticity to the storyline, the creators visited the maximum-security prison Cebu Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Center (CPDRC) to interview the prisoners who participated in the made-in-prison music videos that garnered millions of views on YouTube and subsequently became the basis for the musical. One might recall that the 1,500 prisoners performed an imitation of the well-choreographed zombie dance in Michael Jackson's hit song *Thriller* in one of the videos. Coming from a nation known to produce world-class singers as evidenced by Filipinos winning singing competitions on network shows and landing plum roles on Broadway and elsewhere, *Prison Dancer's* all-Filipino performers belted memorable songs ranging from toe-tapping dance tunes to emotional solos and duets. "Evermore" a set-piece ballad about belief in a happy ending, as sung by husband-and-wife characters Christian (an incarcerated husband played by Daren Dyhengco) and Cherish (the dedicated wife played by Diana Del Rosario), leaves a lasting impression in the audience's minds as both characters showed tenderness and vulnerability.

*Prison Dancer's* story centers around the fierce queer character Lola,

played by Julio Fuentes, who also happens to be the musical's choreographer. Lola is in a relationship with Shakespeare (Dominique Brilliantes), who has a wife in the outside world. Lola organizes fellow inmates and leads the dance productions that become hugely popular. Meanwhile, the shady Warden, played by Jovani Sy, promptly takes credit for the success of Lola's work, much to the chagrin of the inmates. To borrow a concept from renowned scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, the plot for this musical unveils a complex "intersectionality" of class and gender.<sup>1</sup> Too often, in a country where a vast majority of the people are poor, people in positions of power are predisposed to exploiting the powerless and marginalized.<sup>2</sup> In the case of Lola and his fellow gay friends, their identities of being poor and gay make them easy prey for exploitation by wardens and prison guards in the Philippines.

Filipinos who grew up in Canada and the US will readily appreciate the main thrust of the musical. However, the show might draw mixed reactions from some first-generation immigrant population, as evidenced by what others said in internet chat rooms about the show's gay storyline. Further, this writer repeatedly asked the moderator of the Edmonton Filipino Facebook group to post the show's promotional materials and kept getting ignored. I surmised the forum's moderators feared that posting the materials might create backlash from the conservative members, mostly Filipino newcomers. To be clear, Filipinos are some of the world's most respectful, tolerant, and accepting people. The nation consistently scores high in terms of global gender equality rankings.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, many Filipinos know and love family members and close relatives (an Ate and a Kuya) who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community. Many gay and lesbian Filipinos hold high positions of power in the Philippines. However, the Catholic Church still plays an influential role in shaping public opinion and their leadership still holds much sway in determining what is acceptable in mainstream society, particularly in the media.

For example, Filipinos love comedians like Vice Ganda and Brenda Mage, both famous transgender TV personalities. But I hazard a guess that shows with non-comedy and gay storylines would get a less welcoming reaction from the Catholic hierarchy and might send the national media review board into a state of delirium. So here's the challenge: I highly encourage the *Prison Dancer* creators and producers (especially the wonderful Ana Serrano) to stage the show in the Philippines. It will surely spark tremendous media coverage and a great conversation among Manila's wellheeled elites and the madlang people (the masses) about the state of continual exclusion of the LGBTQ+ community in mainstream media and society. I hope the musical will help spur a more serious conversation about equity and inclusion and respect for gender and sexual diversity.

*Prison Dancer's* Canadian run is a good reminder that representation matters. Canada benefits a great deal from the wellspring of world-renowned

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1. Crenshaw, K. (1991). "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

2. See for example, Tizon, A. (June 2017). "My family's slave." *The Atlantic*. Available: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/06/lolas-story/524490/>.

3. Abad, M. (June 24, 2023). Philippines improves in 2023 world gender equality ranking. v. Available: <https://www.rappler.com/nation/philippines-improves-global-gender-gap-index-2023/>.

Filipino musical talent. As a million-strong community, it is incredible to see such support for fostering and affirming Filipino identity, talent, and culture in Canadian society. But more work needs to be done. Research from Professor Adriana Umana-Taylor at Harvard, for example, shows that when minority identities are affirmed and supported in schools and broader society, members of said groups are more likely to feel confident about themselves and become strong contributors to society.

*Prison Dancer* recently had a sold-out run at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa from November 23-December 2, 2023.

Rey Rosales