

5-2020

## Flipping the Script: Gabriela Silang's Legacy through Stagecraft

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<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2020.HCS.ST.02>

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*Humanities & Cultural Studies | Senior Theses*. 2.  
<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2020.HCS.ST.02>

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**Flipping the Script: Gabriela Silang's Legacy through Stagecraft**

By

Leeann Francisco

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Humanities

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

May 2020



## ABSTRACT

Flipping the Script: Gabriela Silang's Legacy through Stagecraft is a chronicle of the scriptwriting and staging process for *Bannuar*, a historical adaptation about the life of Gabriela Silang (1731-1763) produced by Dominican University of California's (DUC) Filipino student club (Kapamilya) for their annual Pilipino Cultural Night (PCN). The 9th annual show was scheduled for April 5, 2020. Due to the limitations of stagecraft, implications of COVID-19, and shelter-in-place orders, the scriptwriters made executive decisions on what to omit or adapt to create a well-rounded script.

In this chronicle, scriptwriters' choices in character development and musical elements in the show are examined. Additionally, it investigates the importance of PCN as a medium for storytelling in Filipino American culture. By analyzing an original script of Silang's life, audiences gain a deeper understanding and more dynamic perspective of her legacy as the first woman warrior of the Philippines. This thesis is a timeline of Silang's life amid the Spanish colonization of the Philippines, an examination of Silang's importance within the Filipino narrative, and how her legacy survives through stagecraft.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my thanks to the professors and staff at Dominican University of California who supported me through my scholarship, especially Carlos Rodriguez, Thomas Burke, and Chase Clow. I am forever grateful for your guidance throughout the past four years. Many thanks to my fellow scriptwriters, Chloe Mauricio, Carmela Dizon, and Krystal Ragasa. Thank you for saying “yes” to this vision, for the long nights finishing scenes, and for navigating these uncharted waters with me. I’d also like to thank the members of Kapamilya. A huge thank you to the Executive Board and PCN Department Heads and Shadows, for giving me the artistic space to learn more about our Filipino community. I’d especially like to acknowledge the graduating members of Kapamilya who were unable to perform their fourth and final PCN. Your work did not go unnoticed and you are the rock of this organization. Always remember what our fearless leader, Adrian Embry, told us: “Be proud of the work you inspired.” Lastly, I extend my deepest gratitude to my loved ones, especially my parents and little sisters. Thank you for encouraging me to pursue the road less travelled and for always answering my Facetime calls.

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## INTRODUCTION

In November of 2016, I walked into a room of strangers to audition for Pilipino Cultural Night (PCN), an annual show produced by the Filipino student club (Kapamilya) at Dominican University of California (DUC). Surprisingly, I was cast as one of the lead roles. Fast forward to today and I serve as one of two Acting Heads. As an Acting Head, I co-write, co-produce, and co-direct PCN, which is entirely run by students of Kapamilya. Although the show is in April, the Acting Heads and Shadows, or Acting Heads-in-training, must determine the theme and storyline months in advance. This allows adequate time to plan with other PCN departments such as Cultural Dancing, Modern Dancing, Singing, Glam Squad, Set Design, and Stage Crew.

During July of 2019, I gathered with the other women in the Acting Department: Chloe, Carmela, and Krystal. For PCN 2020, we wanted to draw inspiration from our rich history. We wanted to steer clear of typical Philippine heroes like José Rizal or Andrés Bonifacio. As young women, we searched for a heroine to highlight the unspoken strength of Filipinas across history. While brainstorming, we found an article from CNN Philippines titled *5 Filipino heroines who changed Philippine history*. The first woman featured in the article was Gabriela Silang (G. Silang). Instantly, we knew she was the one to write the script about.

This thesis began as a biographical study. I wanted to analyze G. Silang's legacy in three parts: Spain's colonization of the Philippine islands, G. Silang's life during this era, and how her legacy is carried on today. My thesis later morphed into a chronicle about how and why the PCN Acting Department, chose G. Silang as a heroine for our show. My thesis dissects a few of the scenes from Act 1 of the script, character development, song and dance choices, and the significance of storytelling in the Filipino-American (Fil-Am) diaspora.

It is very crucial to note two things. First, the “P” in PCN is not a misspelling of Filipino. Rather, it acknowledges the pre-colonial Philippine alphabet which does not include the letters c, v, f, x, q, or r. Second, PCN 2020 was meant to be a historical adaptation. Although the scenes were inspired by pivotal moments in G. Silang’s life, the plot is a dramatic interpretation. We are by no means scholars of Philippine history. Nonetheless, the fictional characters and events were inspired by G. Silang’s story of revolution and female empowerment.

Due to the rapid increase of COVID-19 across the country during March of 2020, the county of Marin went under shelter-in-place directives to enforce social distancing. After about three weeks, DUC announced the rest of the spring semester would finish remotely. To comply with school administration and Marin Health and Human Services, Kapamilya’s Executive Board and PCN Department leaders stopped all rehearsals and plans for the show. At this time, we are still unsure whether PCN 2020 will come to full fruition. Nonetheless, this paper will look at portions of the completed first act and the scriptwriters’ plans for Act 2.

As a first-generation Filipino-American woman, this research is incredibly important to me. G. Silang’s narrative is significant, yet it is rarely mentioned in textbooks or lectures. My community has often been placed on the back burner of American society and this chronicle brings our history to life. G. Silang is the first historical figure who looked like me, grew up in my same region as my mother, and spoke the tongues of my ancestors. By sharing her story, her legacy lives on.

I strive to educate others about the cultural importance behind PCN as a genre of performing arts. I hope this thesis inspires other first-generation students to be proud of their heritage and do their research to carry on the legacies of their cultures. Still, this is the tip of the iceberg. By discovering and retelling these stories, the legacies of long-forgotten heroes will



inspire generations to come. By taking the story into our own hands, we rewrite these abandoned narratives. With this thesis, I hope to illustrate how G. Silang changed the course of the Filipino narrative and how Fil-Am youth can use artistic expression to continue changing this narrative.

## FLIPPING THE SCRIPT: GABRIELA SILANG'S LEGACY THROUGH STAGECRAFT

Performing arts keeps stories alive in fresh and creative ways. For example, DUC's Filipino student club (known as Kapamilya) produces an annual PCN to showcase singing, acting, contemporary dancing, and cultural dancing under a specific theme of Filipino culture or history. On April 5, 2020, DUC's Kapamilya was scheduled to produce their ninth annual show titled *Bannuar*<sup>1</sup>. The show intended to tell the story of Gabriela Silang (G. Silang). This great woman warrior reigned from the Ilocos region in Luzon and was referred to as the first Generela<sup>2</sup> (Sta. Romana-Cruz 23). During the 18th century, G. Silang and her second husband, Diego Silang (D. Silang), worked to free the Ilocano people of Spanish colonizers. Her story, like many others in the Philippine history, is often muddled by colonial narratives and misinterpreted information. By looking specifically at G. Silang's life through stagecraft, audiences are able to better understand her story and the significance of her role during Spanish colonization of the Philippines.

By chronicling *Bannuar's* script writing and production process for Kapamilya's PCN 2020, readers can understand the role of performing arts in sustaining oral tradition, especially within the Fil-Am diaspora. More specifically, this thesis chronicles the importance of using stagecraft as a means of telling the story of the great Gabriela Silang.

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<sup>1</sup> Ilocano word for hero/heroine or idol

<sup>2</sup> Tagalog word for woman general

## WEAVING HISTORY THROUGHOUT THE SCRIPT

After a performance of both the American and Philippine national anthems, *Bannuar* begins with the narrator<sup>3</sup> introducing herself to the audience, breaking the fourth wall of theatre. Her monologue begins:

“Let me set the stage for you. It’s December 31, 1756 and we are in the Ilocos region of the Philippine islands. At this time, the Philippines is one of the Spanish empire’s greatest assets. As the Seven Years’ War wages between the European powers, Spaniards used the Philippines as a pawn in their game by utilizing their resources and land. The upper-class Filipinos, or the principales, live in luxury and typically work as administrators for the Spanish government or el cura, the [Spanish] priests of the Catholic Church. Meanwhile, the lower-class natives struggle to provide for their families. Slowly, whispers of revolution spread and many principalia began to worry. Here in Ilocos, the sentiments of revolution are the talk of the town. To keep locals quiet, la asistencia, or the Spanish officers, turn to violence.” (Dizon, Francisco, Mauricio and Ragasa 1).

Although the show is about G. Silang (see Fig. 1) the authors did not start the show at the beginning of her life. There was not enough thorough and consistent research about Filipino history during the 18th century to gather conclusive evidence about her early years. When the scriptwriters looked at various sources for biographical information about G. Silang, there were contradicting stories. Many sources, like Neni Sta. Romana-Cruz’s children’s book *Gabriela Silang*, showed vague information about her childhood years. Sta. Romana-Cruz explains to young audiences how “historians disagree on certain details of her early childhood” because she lived over two centuries ago during an era where very few written records existed (7). In Sta.

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<sup>3</sup> Unlike the other characters, the Narrator’s tone and aesthetic are meant to be contemporary

Romana-Cruz's account, she held onto the widely accepted claim that G. Silang was born on March 19, 1731 in Caniogon, a barrio in Santa which is known as the smallest town in the southern region of Ilocos. Her parents' lives are also unknown. Many scholars suggest she was mestiza, partly indigenous and partly Spanish. Her father, Anselmo, was believed to be Spanish and Christian. On the other hand, her mother was most likely non-Christian and belonged to the indigenous Itneg tribe (Sta Romana-Cruz 7).



Fig. 1. There are no known portraits of G. Silang but many depict her on a horse with a bolo knife (Sta. Romana-Cruz 6).

In both cases, G. Silang's parents were not wealthy people. They could not afford to pay for a well-rounded education for their daughter. During her childhood, she was separated from her parents. Again, there is much speculation around why this occurred. According to Sta. Romana-Cruz "it was common practice for parents to entrust young children to relatives or to other people who were able to give them a good education and a better future" (7). For the *Bannuar* scriptwriters, this piece was critical because they needed to add a parental character for their storyline. They settled on using Nicolas Cariño as her uncle and father figure in their adaptation of G. Silang's life. It is important to note that Cariño may not have actually been the person to adopt her- or even her biological relative. According to Veneracion, G. Silang was "Separated from her pagan mother in early childhood, and reared as a Christian by the town's parish priest" (2). Veneracion only names Cariño as an aide to G. Silang and her husband's revolution. To further this claim, Sta. Romana-Cruz wrote that Fray Tomas Millan, a well-known person in the city of Vigan in Ilocos Sur, adopted G. Silang and gave her a life filled with Christianity, Spanish language, education, fine arts, and etiquette (7-8).

Many believe a religious and parental figure heavily influenced her early years. Later on, her uncle may have assisted G. Silang in her revolutionary efforts. Aika Rey visited the Cariño ancestral home, which now serves as the Gabriela Cariño Silang Gallery of Fine Arts managed by 5<sup>th</sup> generation descendants. Rey's blog mentions how "she fled to the house of her paternal uncle Nicolas Cariño in Tayum to hide from the Spanish" (4). This supports the argument that Cariño was, in fact, a biological relative. In *Diego Silang's Revolt: A New Approach*, Arcilla and Palanco name Cariño a principal leader of the uprising, but never mention any familial relationship to G. Silang (530). Regardless of who raised her, G. Silang's roots were tied to philanthropy and courage, which created the foundation for her life's work as a revolutionary.

As the first scene progresses, the narrator explains how the audience is about to witness the grand New Years' Day party at Don Nicolas Cariño's home. From the start of the show, the audience understands Cariño and G. Silang's close relationship. When explaining the purpose of the New Years' day extravaganza, Cariño gives Gabriela credit for the fiesta when he says: "My niece thought that we needed a break from reality. These days it has been hard to find a little bit of joy on our islands" (Dizon et al. 2). This line is key to understanding G. Silang's core virtues which guide her throughout the show. When she was about 20 years old, her parents arranged her to be married to a wealthy older man. After three years and no children, her husband died. With a large inheritance and land, she was able to provide for the people in her community who suffered from poverty (Sta. Romana-Cruz 9-10).

The opening scene is situated after her first marriage, when G. Silang meets D. Silang for the very first time. According to Sta. Romana Cruz, she had many suitors who asked for her hand but she chose D. Silang. His family "belonged to the landed and educated class in the Ilocos," better known as the *principalía* (Sta. Romana-Cruz 10). D. Silang worked as a messenger for the government and travelled to and from Manila, where he witnessed the abuse of native Filipino people by the Spanish. In this scene, he connected with Cariño by talking about forming a revolution against Spain. As the scene ends, Cariño is taken into custody by Spanish officers who overhear their anti-colonial sentiments and charge him "for organizing against *la asistencia de Vigan*" (Dizon et al. 4). D. Silang, seeing G. Silang absolutely devastated by her uncle's detainment, takes the opportunity to assist her in releasing her uncle from prison.

For dramatic purposes the scriptwriters added a more dynamic love story to the show. The second scene of Act 1 portrays G. Silang and D. Silang's romantic relationship and how they work in tandem to release Cariño from prison. This builds up to Scene 3 which highlights their

wedding ceremony. While the actors pantomime the matrimonial ceremony, the narrator recites the following monologue:

“In most marriages during this time, this ceremony signified the bride surrendering herself entirely to her new husband. Her possessions, her time, and her money belonged to him. But, in this union, Gabriela knew that she and Diego were equals. In Diego’s eyes, Gabriela was not just adored, but also valued. She was protected, but not seen as vulnerable or weak. As individuals they were strong, but together they were indestructible. With these rings, they were making a vow before God, before each other, before their loved ones, and before their whole community in need. Despite the violence and uncertainty in their daily lives, this marriage was a reminder of who and what they were fighting for. In the face of chaos, their love stood firm” (Dizon et al. 12).

For the scriptwriters, it was important to stage their wedding because it was a pivotal moment in G. Silang’s life and the revolution. Regardless of how beautiful their romance was, it is important for the audience to understand this scene was not only about their relationship, but about G. Silang and how she carried the roles of wife and revolutionary leader on her back like no other woman of her time. The writers wanted to find a balance between staying true to the Silang legacy and shedding light on a female protagonist and heroine. G. Silang lived in a time “when women were expected to give all their time to their families and their homes” (Sta. Romana-Cruz 5). By incorporating the lines above, the writers kept the plot focused on the woman warrior, rather than her role as a man’s love interest.

Scene four, titled “For Our People,” hones in on D. Silang’s interactions with the British. The scriptwriters illustrated D. Silang as anti-Spanish and pro-British, as long as the British

provided weapons against the Spanish and allowed D. Silang to lead his local people. The scene goes as follows:

“**[Draper]:** (*defensive*) You think I’m foolish enough to give you my men and receive nothing in return... Do not try to outsmart me, young man. How do I know that you are not working with the Spanish to take more land away from me?”

**[D. Silang]:** I am loyal to my people.

**[Draper]:** How so? What if you are also loyal to the Spanish?

**[D. Silang]:** I was blessed with rare privilege as a member of the *principalia*—the educated noble class. I see how the Spanish treat the less fortunate in our communities. They enforced an annual collection of tribute from families who cannot afford it. Debt in crop tribute leads to debt in taxes. If you cannot pay, you are arrested. They required all male Filipinos to participate [in] forced labor. Reconstructing roads and bridges, cutting down timber with their bare, bleeding, hands... All for a ‘promised’ daily ration of rice, which is rarely given” (Dizon et al. 15).

According to some scholars this was not the case. According to Flannery, D. Silang “Shrewdly exploit[ed] inter-imperial rivalry, [he] attempted to bargain with British and Spanish officials in order to meet his objectives” (480). In 1762, D. Silang wrote to Anda, the senior Basque official in Manila’s colonial government, and committed himself to the King of Spain. All the while, D. Silang wrote a letter “to the Manila Council in which he recognised George III as [his] king and master,’ provided that the Ilocanos were released from tribute and allowed to continue practicing their religion” (Flannery 480). He intelligently negotiated and sent the council gifts such as loaves of sugar, baskets of sticky rice, and chocolate “to demonstrate the genuineness of his promises and the tangible benefits that would accrue to the British from an



alliance” (Flannery 480-481). According to Sta. Romana-Cruz, General Dawson Drake was so impressed with D. Silang that he honored him with the title of captain general and recognized him as the head of the Ilocano government (19). Soon after, the British accepted D. Silang’s offer and dispatched 50 soldiers to Ilocos armed with weapons and ammunition. Yet, many speculate that he only received a small bronze cannon (Sta. Romana-Cruz 19). By doing so, the British supported D. Silang in his fight against Anda’s troops who desired to extinguish the flames of rebellion (Flannery).

When thinking of how to stage this important piece of history, the scriptwriters looked for a way to keep the focus on G. Silang. In Scene 5, the scriptwriters added an intense dialogue between the married couple about D. Silang’s decision to create an alliance with General William Draper and his sidekicks Sir Jacob and Sir Gordon<sup>4</sup>. After his return from Manila, a fight stems from D. Silang’s choice to move forward with the rebellion on his own terms, without consulting his closest advisors, including his beloved wife. In the first draft of this scene, there was no indication of a quarrel between the husband and wife. In fact, the scriptwriters had G. Silang’s forgive her husband passively, as if she did not care why and how he made negotiations with foreign powers. Although this scene may not be historically accurate, it kept the plot focused around the heroine. The following is G. Silang’s monologue as she defends her feelings to her husband:

“It seems that you have already forgotten the vows we made before God, before each other, before our loved ones, and before our entire community in need. Are you still fighting for the right people, Diego? (*starts to choke up*) ‘Alaem ti bileg nga aggapo

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<sup>4</sup> Draper was a British Army Officer who conquered Manila in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century; Jacob and Gordon are fictional characters added to create comical relief

kadigiti principales, ket ipaay mo kadagiti tattao<sup>5</sup>.' We promised to wrest power from the principales and restore it to the people. You convinced me that we would do this together. I married you because I knew your intentions and the goodness behind them. I was so sure we had a common goal, that you understood my purpose, that you would treat me as a partner in this revolution. I am not so sure anymore. I know that my people deserve freedom, but I am not certain you are the one who can give them the freedom they need” (Dizon et al. 18).

Appropriately titled “Betrayal,” the final scene of Act 1 begins on the morning of May 28, 1763, better known as the day of D. Silang’s assassination. For dramatic flair, the playwrights did not resolve Silangs’ marital issues. Five months after G. Silang and her husband fought over his decision to include the British in their plans, they are not on speaking terms. The scene opens with G. Silang’s close friends and leaders of a renowned (yet entirely fictional) travelling performance troupe, the Del Rosario sisters, visiting her home. After speaking with the Del Rosario sisters about her fight with D. Silang, they help her understand that leading a rebellion is an incredibly difficult task and reminded her that the enemy is the one who sits at the head of their government, not the one whom she married (Dizon et al 19-20). This conversation was intentional as it reinforces the theme of female empowerment.

According to Arcilla and Palanco, D. Silang was murdered by his close friends, Pedro Becbec and Miguel Vicos, who were active collaborators in the Silangs’ revolutionary plans (529). Becbec and Vicos conspired with Bishop Ustáriz, “who blessed them in the morning of 28 May, before they carried out the plan” (Arcilla and Palanco 529). This proved the Catholic Spanish leaders authorized, and most likely bribed, Becbec and Vicos to assassinate D. Silang

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<sup>5</sup> Ilocano proclamation meaning “Wrest power from the principales and restore it to the people”

(See Fig. 2). The scriptwriters added this dialogue to the final scene to allow the audience to understand Pedro and Miguel's ethical dilemma:

**Pedro:** We are surrounded by enemies! The principales and church are still loyal to Spain. If they call for help, we will be slaughtered!

**Miguel:** We can undermine his leadership if we stay by his side. We do not have to betray him, Pedro. (*pauses*) Pedro, please... we do not need to follow their orders and kill [him].

**Pedro:** (*grabs Miguel*) We already took the money, Miguel!

**Miguel:** We put a price on freedom!

**Pedro:** We only put a price on a single life!

**Miguel:** (*pushes Pedro off*) How can we kill a man we pledged our lives to? A revolution we fought and still stand for!

**Pedro:** We pledged to a free nation, not Diego" (Dizon et al.19-20).

This event changed the course of their plans for revolution. By killing D. Silang, the Spanish leaders in Ilocos took strides towards squashing the Silangs' growing popularity. Arcilla and Palanco claim written accounts showed many Ilocano natives even celebrated Becbec and Vicos after learning about D. Silang's assassination (529).

With this in mind, the scriptwriters attempted to keep this scene as authentic as possible. At the tail end of G. Silang's heartwarming conversation with her friends, they hear gunshots. In a panic, she urges the Del Rosario sisters to leave the house without turning back. In the original script, she turns to find her husband's assailants ready to kill her, hoping not to leave any loose ends behind. Then, the lights would fade into a blackout as D. Silang lays dead on the floor

center stage. This original ending more closely matches Sta. Romana Cruz's book which implied the fight for freedom was solely his, rather than a shared effort:

"... Vicos shot him with a short-barreled firearm. Diego died at around two o'clock in the afternoon. Gabriela came rushing in from the neighboring barracks. As Gabriela held her dying husband in her arms, she vowed to continue his fight for freedom and to avenge his death. Widowed for a second time, Gabriela was full of anger and grief... There was no time to mourn – her fighting spirit led her on" (21).



Fig. 2. This drawing shows how D. Silang "was shot to death by a man who was paid to put an end to the Ilocos revolt" (Sta. Romana-Cruz 22).

After reading this scene several times, the writers realized this was not their intention behind the ending of Act 1. As the scriptwriters began writing Act 2, they realized G. Silang needed to share a final moment with her husband before leaving Vigan. By doing so, it allowed the writers to solely focus the second act of *Bannuar* on G. Silang's role as Generela instead of her process of grieving and finding her footing as an independent leader. So, in the finalized script G. Silang finds her husband shot by Becbec and Vicos and holds him as she let out wails of pain and agony with the lights slowly fading to black, signaling the end of Act 1 and D. Silang's penultimate appearance onstage (Dizon et al 22). By leaving D. Silang's character in Act 1, the writers create more space and stage time for G. Silang to develop as a leader without the help of a male counterpart.

## LOOKING BEYOND THE SCRIPT

Due to the rapid spread of COVID-19, DUC shut its doors for the remainder of the Spring 2020 semester. To ensure the health and safety of everyone involved it was a necessary, and albeit heartbreaking, decision to postpone *Bannuar*. During this challenging time, the members of Kapamilya felt a lack of control over many cancelled or postponed events which they spent months planning. As DUC students moved to their hometowns and classes continued remotely, the script was put on hold until the administration approved Kapamilya for a future show date. The script creates a structure for the whole production. It is equally important for audiences to look beyond the script to appreciate and understand the minute details of *Bannuar* because they heavily impact the story Kapamilya captures onstage. More specifically, the choices behind the title of the show, their use of Freddie Aguilar's famous song "Bayan Ko,"<sup>6</sup> and their portrayal of G. Silang's death are key examples of looking beyond the script.

The naming of a PCN production is as ritualistic and important as solidifying a theme for the show. A PCN's title allows the audience to peek through the curtains of Angelico Concert Hall and see what Kapamilya has spent months rehearsing. The title, usually a word or phrase in Tagalog, captured the overarching theme of the show. This year's production is unique because it was the first time a show highlighted one of over a dozen Philippine regions and used the national language of Tagalog, alongside Ilocano, the regional dialect from the Ilocos region. Additionally, this production is the first time Kapamilya highlighted a historical figure as its lead character and, in terms of chronological order, the earliest story ever told in Kapamilya's history. With this in mind, the scriptwriters looked for words in Tagalog and Ilocano words which

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<sup>6</sup> Tagalog phrase for "my country"

reflected this momentous show. Words such as bayani<sup>7</sup>, wayawaya<sup>8</sup>, waywaya<sup>9</sup>, ayat<sup>10</sup>, billit<sup>11</sup> and bannuar came to mind. Some suggested using Gabriela or Silang as the title of the show. There was positive and negative feedback for each proposed title. At the end of a long meeting, the PCN leaders narrowed the choices down to Gabriela, Silang, and bannuar. Gabriela was straightforward, but it was too much of a contemporary name and did not create the theatrical effect they longed for. Silang was a strong choice, but they acknowledged it was D. Silang's last name and put the focus on him rather than G. Silang. In the end, the winner was bannuar. Its strong sound and meaning resonated with the national heroine they were portraying. Also, its Ilocano roots emphasized the importance of regional culture within the diverse islands.

At the end of the opening scene of Act 2, G. Silang escapes to the mountains to find safety and solace from Becbec, Vicos, and their Spanish allies. With D. Silang dead, she singlehandedly carried the torch of the revolution and became a threat to Spanish colonies. Still, D. Silang's comrades mourned the loss of their friend and leader. So, in this scene the Del Rosario sisters organize an intimate gathering with only a handful of D. Silang's most trusted revolutionaries in the middle of the night to keep out of the sight of government authorities or members of the principales. During the small memorial, a group of singers begin performing the famous song "Bayan Ko" in the style of Filipino folk singer Freddie Aguilar. The English translation is as follows:

"Land of gold and flowers

Love bestowed to her

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<sup>7</sup> Tagalog word for hero/heroine

<sup>8</sup> Ilocano word for liberty or independence

<sup>9</sup> Ilocano word for freedom

<sup>10</sup> Ilocano word for love (representing love of self, love of community, or love of country)

<sup>11</sup> Ilocano word for bird (as a nod to the references to birds in "Bayan Ko" and Kadal Taho)

Offered beauty and glow.  
Due to her beauty and grace  
Foreigners are tempted.  
My country, they enslaved you  
Gave you endless suffering.  
Even bird that fly freely  
Will cry once caged.  
My land so fair  
Yearns to break free.  
Philippines that I so adore  
Nest of tears and poverty  
All that I desire  
To see you rise and free” (“Ang Bayan Ko”).



Fig. 3. Kapamilya's 2018 PCN staged the events during the Marcos administration, including the protests after the Plaza Miranda bombing (source: Facebook).



The song originated as a poem by Jose Corazon around the 1920s and composer Constancio de Guzman set it to music (Lozano). The lyrics were especially important during the Japanese Occupation of World War II and during former President Ferdinand Marcos's term. Marcos, known famously for enacting Martial Law in the 1970s<sup>12</sup>, "banned the airing of [the song] on the airwaves during martial law but that did not deter Aguilar to record a new version of the song" (Lozano). Students used the same song as their anthem during the First Quarter Storm, protests held after Marcos' election in 1969 which prompted him to declare Martial Law three years later. Activists were inspired by the lyrics of "Bayan Ko" as they rallied during former President Corazon Aquino's rallies against Marcos (See Fig. 4). Upon reflection, singer Leah Navarro commented: "Whenever we would sing the song, iba talaga<sup>13</sup>. The words came to life" (Lozano 12). "Bayan Ko" remains a tear-jerking and patriotic song for Filipinos across the world because it reminds them of their experiences under tyranny and oppression. It was no coincidence why this song was chosen for D. Silang's memorial scene. The performance's purpose is doubly important as it recognizes the Silang couple as soldiers for independence, but also reinforces the cruelty of Spain's authoritarian rule.

In one of the last scenes of the show, the scriptwriters were tasked with writing G. Silang's death scene. This was extremely difficult as they knew, from the start, they were unable to depict this scene in an authentic presentation. Her death was as gruesome as it was inhumane. G. Silang and 80 of her warriors were captured by Spanish soldiers five days after the Battle of Vigan in the mountains. According to Sta. Romana-Cruz, "a special kind of death was planned"

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<sup>12</sup> In 2018, Kapamilya performed *Pag-Asa*, a show about the experiences of a Filipino barrio during the Marcos administration (see Fig. 3)

<sup>13</sup> Tagalog expression signifying an object, event/experience, or person feels or acts very in a passionately different or unreal way; In this context, Navarro implies how the song created a different or unreal emotional experience than she had felt before



Fig. 4. Corazon "Cory" Aquino at a political rally in downtown Manila (Collins).

for these defiant rebels (28). In single file line, they were hanged and Spanish soldiers lined their bodies along coastal towns to serve as warnings to those who dare to defy Spanish rule. On a September morning in 1763, just months after she held her dying husband in her arms, G. Silang was escorted to a plaza in Vigan. She was the last to die, in hopes that she would experience more pain and suffering as she watched her fellow warriors die at the hands of her colonizers. According to the Spanish, if she fought like her male warriors she deserved to die just like them. As she was hanged for her crimes against Spain, a crowd of Spanish and Filipino townspeople gathered and some even proclaimed “Long, live Spain” as they celebrated “the capture of a dreaded enemy of government” (Sta. Romana-Cruz 28).

Due to the nature of this family-friendly event, the scriptwriters had no intention of staging G. Silang’s execution. They brainstormed ways in which they could stage an abstract and unorthodox death scene, like the one found in *Hamilton* where Alexander Hamilton sees his life

flash before his eyes as the bullet slowly reaches his body. In collaboration with Kapamilya's Cultural Dance Department, the scriptwriters found their solution: Kadal Taho<sup>14</sup>. Kadal Taho is a traditional dance originally from Lake Cebu in the South Cotabato province of the Philippines. Typically performed by the T'boli tribe during planting and harvesting season, it portrays a flock of birds. As they fly together across the stage, one is injured. The remainder of the dance centers around the majority of the flock rescuing and healing their sister bird so that she can rejoin the flock (see Fig. 5). This was the perfect vehicle to visually represent G. Silang's brokenness upon dying, leaving behind her people, and entering into the afterlife.



Fig. 5. Originating from the T'boli people, the Kadal Taho costumes represent a flock of birds (“Kadal-Tajo”).

During the penultimate scene of the show, G. Silang is in a jail cell after being arrested and charged for avenging her husband's death and killing Becbec. She writes a final letter to the

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<sup>14</sup> Also spelled Kadal Tajo or Kadal-Tajo

Del Rosario sisters, begging them to keep her revolution alive after she is gone. Suddenly, the guards carry her away to the wings of the stage, as if she were to be executed. Behind stage, she quickly changes into her white wedding dress from the wedding scene and upon entering the stage she realizes she is no longer on her earthly home. She is transported to a divine realm—alone and afraid. She cannot help but wonder how she came to be there or who is with her. As she begins to call out for her beloved uncle and husband, her screams turn to tears. Suddenly, dancers appear onstage and the Kadal Taho begins. As the dance progresses, she is picked up by the dancers and begins to regain her composure and dance alongside them. At the end of the dance number, D. Silang's voice is heard overhead as he calls out his wife's name. Then, he appears from the wings encouraging her to join him. As the dancers exit the stage, he holds her hands and softly tells her "Welcome home, Gabriela" as they exit the stage. Not only does Kadal Taho allow the scriptwriters more creative freedom, but it gives the audiences a more dramatic interpretation of her death.

## PCN AS A MEDIUM FOR STORYTELLING IN FILIPINO-AMERICAN DIASPORA

Theodore S. Gonzalves, curator for Asian Pacific American history at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, wrote *A Day the Dancers Stayed: Performing in the Filipino/American Diaspora* as a means of “[tracing] a genealogy of the Pilipino American Cultural Night<sup>15</sup>... a cultural form made popular by Filipino students in the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s” (9). Gonzalves analyzes the relationship between PCN repertoire and diasporic identification. Many argue that PCN is not just a celebration of the motherland, but an opportunity for young adults in the Fil-Am community to search for and hold onto their cultural roots. PCN for Kapamilya is no different. *Bannuar* is a prime example of how a group of students search for a deeper connection with their rich and complex history.

To understand the full scope of any PCN production, one must go back and look at where this medium originated and how it came to flourish as a genre of performing arts for many college students. During the early 1940s in New York, Bruna P. Seril founded and coordinated a folk-dance performing group. In the late 1960s, “student organizers created curricula deemed relevant for a global education” and called for courses about the history, economics, and dances of the Philippines. *Gabi ng Pilipino*, which translates to night or evening of the Filipino in English, was a popular event from the late 1970s to the mid 1980s sponsored by the Fil-Am organization at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. The night was typically filled with various dances and musical performances (Gonzalves 90). According to Gonzalves, around the middle of the 1980s “PCN had developed into a familiar stage show consisting of folkloric dance

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<sup>15</sup> It is common for some universities to call their production Pilipino American Cultural Night (PACN) instead of PCN

wedded to an asynchronous theatrical narrative” (89). Before the late 20th century, many community-based groups, student organizations, and performers coordinated cultural presentations or festivals (Gonzalves 89).

TFC, or The Filipino Channel, is the world’s main source for popular media from the Philippines through cable, satellite, web and mobile services. TFC carries a range of programs “to suit the needs and preferences of over 8 million overseas Filipinos” (“About TFC”). Although Filipinos may look to TFC for shows, news broadcasts, and movies about the Philippines and Filipino values, Filipinos “rarely see or hear themselves as Filipinos” on other popular media platforms (Gonzalves 122). To combat this, over the past decade Fil-Ams have made great strides towards greater representation onscreen and onstage. On the hit CW show, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, Vincent Rodriguez III, who “was raised in a dominantly Filipino family,” plays the role of Josh Chan (Guillermo 14). In a 2016 interview with NBC news, the Daly City native said there may have been confusion about the authenticity of Chan as a Fil-Am character. Although the show is set in West Covina, a predominantly Filipino neighborhood in the suburbs of Los Angeles county, Rodriguez said “there was confusion from [the] audiences’ end since it was something we didn’t put in the writing in the first few episodes. But I was always playing a Filipino Character with a Filipino surname” (Guillermo 13). Rodriguez’s role as Chan broke boundaries in “network television because the role of ‘love interest’ has rarely been written for Asian-American males” (Guillermo 4). He told his interviewer how he “[accepted] that [his] nationality was not depicted on TV or film... Once [he] realized [his] love for acting and possibility of pursuing a career in it, [he] quickly noticed the absence of Asians in general” and he sought out to be the change he wished to see onscreen.

Another example comes from the popular Broadway musical *Hamilton*. On the last day of 2019, One Down, a Filipino Media and News Company, featured a list of Fil-Ams who broke into the entertainment business with a bang during the first decade of the 21st century. Among the list of artists was Marc Dela Cruz, “the first Filipino - and Asian American- actor to play the lead role in the Tony Award-winning musical, *Hamilton*” (One Down 8). His Broadway debut was in 2014, but he starred as founding father Alexander Hamilton in January of 2019. In a Facebook post he wrote: “It’s an honor to represent my communities in any way big or small. Since joining *Hamilton* I’ve witnessed the power of this show to bring people together in a positive, uplifting way” (Ang 3). Prior to *Hamilton*, Dela Cruz had a laundry list of experience including a performance with the cast of *Allegiance* in San Diego’s Old Globe Theatre with another the Filipina pop culture legend, Lea Salonga (Ang).

Artists like Dela Cruz and Rodriguez are paving the way for an increase in Filipino and Fil-Am representation in performance art. Still, there is an underlying issue with both cases: their characters’ stories are not inherently or explicitly part of the Philippine or Fil-Am narratives. While they, as individuals, are using their artistic abilities to surpass the expectations for Fil-Ams in popular media, their characters and storylines do not directly reflect the values and history as portrayed in the genre of PCN. Although it is important to note the validity and importance of their work to boost Fil-Am representation in the arts, the PCN genre has the capability to go one step further by providing a blank slate for young adults in the Fil-Am community to tell their stories and those of their ancestors. This empty canvas allows Fil-Am students to create plots which distinguish and solidify their place in a society which often neglects to tell their story.

PCN, as a whole, has been subject to criticism over the past few years. According to Gonzalves, many have pointed out “how students undertheorized their importation of folkloric

forms... opening themselves to the charge of being sloppy interpreters of ‘native’ culture” (123). This criticism specifically calls out PCNs which utilize pieces of regional cultures, such as the Muslim dance suites from the southern islands of the Philippines. Often times, PCN organizers put all of Philippine culture under one umbrella. They neglect to recognize various regions and indigenous groups of the Philippines. For example, with *Bannuar*, the scriptwriters grappled between using Tagalog or Ilocano – in addition to Spanish and English throughout the script. Using Tagalog would be best for the audience as many of them speak or understand Tagalog, but using Ilocano honors G. Silang and stays true to her narrative. Scriptwriters and producers must tread carefully when choosing such distinct pieces because different regions call for specific languages, customs, dances, songs, and aesthetics. Gonzalves acknowledges that a huge obstacle, which contributes to the issue of sloppy interpretation, is that “Mass forms such as the PCN do not lend themselves to tidy histories” (96). The Philippine and Fil-Am histories are so incredibly muddled by colonization that many college students lack the resources and time to fully research and understand the depth of the stories they are attempting to portray onstage.

Another criticism comes from within many Fil-Am student organizations. Since PCN is produced by college students who eventually graduate and leave the school, it is difficult to create a stream of continuity amongst participants. Seasoned veterans of PCN try to pass on the torch to the next generation of PCN cast members, scriptwriters, and producers but new students may not fully understand what it takes to maintain and undertake a show as big as this. New participants “may not realize that people before them had struggled to provide many traditions/programs in existence” (Gonzalves 123). A former PCN choreographer and performer told Gonzalves about worries after leaving their institution: “I think [new participants] are losing the purpose of why we’re doing this... [T]here were other people that really fought very hard to



keep the doors open” (123). Many new participants are disconnected from the stories told through PCN and do not realize the struggles for Fil-Ams, which are still prevalent and must be brought to light. For current Kapamilya members, COVID-19 created a large issue of continuity as many continuing students were unable to fully experience the technicalities of PCN since the show may be cancelled due to campus closure. Therefore, many future PCN participants may not fully comprehend the amount of work which goes into the last few weeks leading up to the show.

Upon further investigation, Gonzalves wrote about the increase in tuition and lack of Filipinos in higher education which pose a threat to future PCNs. In his book he asked, “How relevant were cultural productions given these material changes in the lives of students?” (124). While many PCN organizers and community members did their own research, they hoped PCN could provide a “means to achieve a community organizing around access to higher education” (Gonzalves 124). In the 1980s and 1990s, access to higher education became an issue of great controversy for minorities as various higher education administrations, like the Regents of the University of California school system, “banned race-conscious admissions policies” and tuition costs continued to climb. At that rate, college was becoming increasingly difficult to access thus decreasing the value of student-led events such as PCN.

The last critique Gonzalves points out is how PCN has become privileged and repetitive. When discussing the humor of elder relatives portrayed as characters onstage, Gonzalves wrote about Marivi Soliven Blanco’s observation after watching a comedy show in Berkeley: “I realized that all those jokes about the bizarre nicknames, dysfunctional plumbing, quirky media, and assorted freaks in the Philippines implied a sense of cultural superiority” (123). Blanco saw past the humor and noticed the subtle, but very real, authoritarian way Fil-Am students may present themselves when writing about the Philippine narrative- which many of them may not have

experienced or know enough about. Rather than understanding what is really happening in their homeland, PCN organizers repeated and regurgitated the stories told by previous casts or even different schools. This criticism points out how “the entire show [can] become a grand and bloated restatement of Filipino American culture” which may be outdated, irrelevant, or overplayed. As scriptwriters and PCN organizers press forward, they must be careful as they decide what themes, plots, and characters to highlight in their show.

Regardless of the harsh criticisms and extenuating circumstances, PCN has forged itself as an impressive and beautiful form of storytelling for the new generation of Fil-Am people. Much of PCN’s origins stem from young adults’ needs to express and explore their identities as people with two different cultural backgrounds. Like many individuals in immigrant cultures, Filipinos who moved to the United States assimilated to American culture as a means of survival. These immigrants, who later became parents of first-generation Fil-Am youth, “often push[ed] their children to adopt the dominant culture’s reward system while in college, with the expectation that their [youth] will become less like them, less Filipino” (Gonzalves 90-91). By following the rules of conformity, immigrant parents hoped their children would grow into “better-educated versions of themselves” without direct association to their former lives in the Philippines (Gonzalves 91). This severed ties with their cultural practices, national history, or “even an embarrassing or potentially damaging accent” (Gonzalves 91). Consequently, this creates a disconnect between many Fil-Am youth and their cultural identity.

PCN creates a space for Fil-Am students to dismantle their immigrant parents’ hesitation in sharing their stories about the Philippines. Whether they feel ashamed about the developing country they left behind or whether they hope to protect their children from being perceived as different than their American peers, parents make deliberate choices “about what aspects of the

culture are available” (Gonzalves 122). Gonzalez uses the example of Victor Merina, who recalled how he was bullied for his Filipino accent as a child:

“[My parents] didn’t want us to learn Tagalog... or a dialect from their islands... At first, they spoke both dialects at home with my sister and me. But after the incidents of language at school, they made a conscious decision not to mix the languages. So they didn’t speak Tagalog to my sister or [me] when we were growing up. In retrospect, we all regret that now” (Gonzalves 122).

PCN often showcases students playing out the resentment and disappointment Merina speaks about. Students act as mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, or older cousins (usually donning a thick and overexaggerated Filipino accent) who represent the older generation of Filipino immigrants who may hinder the younger Fil-Am generation from fully understanding the Filipino piece of their cultural identity. Often, this approach to PCN creates moments of comical relief. Audience members laugh because the humor “stems from recognizing the unrecognizable” (Gonzalves 123). Actors who play the role of an elder relative find their lines hilarious and much too familiar. Gonzalves points out how this humor actually reveals an “insecurity on the part of the students, a resentment even directed toward elders for not having communicated more cultural knowledge” (123). The scriptwriting and production choices are not just a nod to a cultural narrative, but an opportunity to identify and possibly heal the wounds created by the need to assimilate towards American values.

According to Gonzalves, PCN’s core purpose offers a solution to what Kimberly Aldio refers to as a “productive problem... [or] historiographical and familiar gaps in knowledge” (90). When students put their time into planning, rehearsing, and producing a show as grand as PCN, they are addressing the heart of the productive problem. PCN is not just a form of entertainment.

Rather, the large-scale show sets the stage for answering burning questions about the Philippine and Fil-Am narratives that “are not adequately addressed institutionally on campuses and informally at home” (Gonzalves 90). Over the years, PCN developed into a genre of artistic expression which honors the Philippines as a homeland without diluting the production with an excess of American values and norms.

## CONCLUSION

This work is significant because it sheds light on PCN as a genre of performing arts that is constantly growing and evolving. As Gonzalves points out, there is room for improvement as students learn how to navigate obstacles of continuity, internal administrative decisions which greatly affect minority student populations, and to create content which reflects Fil-Am values without a sense of repetitiveness or careless interpretation. The unique use of original stagecraft, scriptwriting, musical elements, costume design, and set design are derived from thousands of years of Philippine history and experiences. Although Asian-American representation has increased over the past decade, the storylines presented are not explicitly Fil-Am. PCN allows such narratives to reach a wider audience. PCN gives young adults the chance to learn more about their culture and present it to their community in a format that is easy to understand, and occasionally tugs at the heart strings.

Regardless of the shelter-in-place due to COVID-19, this thesis allows readers to get a glimpse of the intentions and vision behind *Bannuar*. This chronicle preserves the process and history behind the show. The scriptwriters dared to do something different because they did not want to be repetitive interpreters of the Philippine narrative. For the first time, audiences are not just limited to watching the once-in-a-lifetime show. While acknowledging these challenging times, the stories behind *Bannuar* serve as an inspiration and milestone for the next generation of Fil-Am students who will take on the monstrous challenge of producing future PCNs.

## EPILOGUE

During such uncertain times, Kapamilya must come to realize *Bannuar* may never be performed as intended. PCN brings in a large amount of revenue for the club. So, the PCN leaders feel it is in the club's best interest that a performance is completed as a means of providing for future expenses. The Executive Board and PCN Department Heads created backup plans if the Marin Health and Human Services and DUC Administration allow large gatherings once the curve flattens. The most difficult course of action would be to return in the fall or winter to perform the show for a small audience. Since the cast and crew add up to more than 50 people, an audience may not be permitted. In this case, the show may be performed without an audience, recorded, and sold as a video. If large sized gatherings are permitted within the next six months, the PCN Departments may gather with a small audience to do a table reading of the script with a few song and dance performances. This allows people to experience the story of *Bannuar* without requiring the cast and crew to rehearse weeks in advance. This plan may also limit technical difficulties as the use of extensive lights and sound are not required for a casual table reading. Of course, these are not solidified plans as most California counties continue to encourage social distancing and enforce shelter-in-place orders.

One of the biggest problems with all of these plans is how it affects PCN 2021. As mentioned in the introduction, the planning process for a production as large as this begins almost a year in advance. With this in mind, producing *Bannuar* may take time away from the planning of PCN 2021. Nonetheless, many members of Kapamilya still hope for *Bannuar* to be performed in some way, shape, or form. Furthermore, the scriptwriters plan to finish the second act of the script this coming summer.

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