

# Theatre for Women's Empowerment

*by the Philippine Educational Theater Association*

In 1995, the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) marked its 28th year as a leading theatre group in the country. Founded in 1967, PETA has popularized the use of theatre as a potent and dynamic vehicle for the people's education. In the last ten years, the Philippines has seen the rise of women's organizations dedicated to the empowerment of Filipino women. PETA has been tapped by many of these organizations to perform plays on women's issues as well as to conduct workshops for women's networks. Recognizing the important role and contribution of theatre in advocating women in development issues, PETA formally established its Women's Theater Collective (WTC) in 1994, in partnership with KULU—Women and Development. Its immediate objective was to establish a women's theatre program in PETA with integrated components of research, education, training, and workshops with women from disadvantaged sectors as well as the dissemination of experiences revolving around women's status in the Philippines. WTC has developed a general theatre curriculum for women and development using people's theatre to advocate gender sensitivity. The collective also presents community drama/productions tackling women's issues in different communities and schools in Manila and Luzon.



*"Usapang Babae," 1990*

*Photo: Liza Magtoto*

In 1990, PETA was commissioned by the Women's Resource Research Center (WRRRC) to perform a play, *Usapang Babae*, for the National Conference on Women in the Philippines. *Usapang Babae* examines the lives of three different women—one who is forced to work as a domestic servant abroad; another who was sexually abused, dreamt of getting married and working as a nurse but ended up a masseuse and then a porno star; and a battered wife who is torn between accepting her husband's punches and fighting them. As the last episode of the play was ending, just as the husband was about to hit his wife again, the people in the audience were enjoined to make loud noises and bang their chairs, pots, and pans to prevent him from hurting her again. "So that the men may know that we are prepared to protect ourselves," said one woman character. The barrage of noise that came from the audience seemed to rise from their guts, as if by allowing it to do so they were breaking out of their own repressed state. PETA was successful in eliciting participation from the audience as a symbol of women's collective action and support of each other.

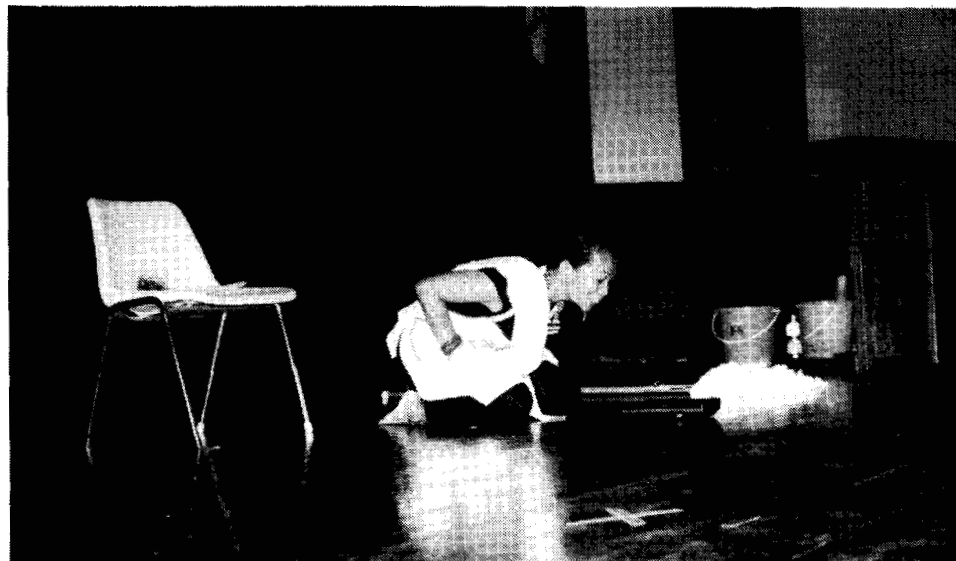


For PETA's 27th theatre season, the company mounted *Seks, Susi at Sangkalan* (1994). A trilogy of monologues, the plays unmask the sociological aspects of womanhood and delve into the ways in which society attempts to "create" women out of men's moulds. Two of the trilogies are a re-staging of two episodes from *Sion, Sion...* and the third, *Lutong Bahay* is an original play that revolves around three generations of single mothers and their bittersweet quest for the "perfect happy homelife" recipe.



*"Seks, Susi at Sangkalan," Stories of Women, Fort Santiago 1994. Photos by Ricky Villabona and Neil Daza*

On the same year, upon the invitation of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), PETA was asked to participate at the Women Empowering Communication Conference in Thailand. PETA performed *Ritwal*, a montage of excerpts from PETA's women productions. The main objective of the performance was to showcase how effective theatre is as a medium for women's empowerment.



*"Ritwal," Bangkok, Thailand, February 12-17, 1994*

For the Mobile Theater Season, WTC mounted *Itang* (1994)—an excerpt from *Usapang Babae*. *Itang* tackled the issue of domestic violence. It used Augusto Boal's "theater forum" in its manner of presentation. "Theater forum" is a style in theatre which encourages the audience to participate in the theatre process; in this case asking them to replace the actor playing the most oppressed character in order to help resolve her problems. The play was performed in poor, urban communities where the women took turns assuming the role of "Itang" (the oppressed character). The play was very effective in bringing out the spontaneous reactions and feelings of the audience which are valuable indicators of their level of self-awareness. The medium of "theater forum" was used precisely to become a take-off point for the community organizers in their discussions with the audience/community on the issue of domestic violence.



*"Itang," The woman...The wife...Battered!*

*Photo: Liza Magtoto*

PETA has become gender-conscious and as it delves into this consciousness, it hopes to empower other women in the process of building and creating a more gender sensitive society. As gender conscious theatre artists, we mirror life experiences to audiences, both male and female, expressing and communicating ideas, thoughts, and feelings so that all concerned will become empowered and move to action.

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