

# Mrs. B: A Review

by Mary Aileen D. Bacalso

This piece dares to review the play *Mrs. B* which portrays the politically relevant and powerful role of a woman, who, by dint of her noble commitment to the cause of the disappeared, has earned for herself the implicit title of being an icon to the relatives of the *desaparecidos* during the Arroyo administration. This review simply attempts to tell the readers of the excruciating pain being suffered by all the families of enforced disappearances all over the world, personified by the mother of a Filipino *desaparecido*, Mrs. Edita Burgos.

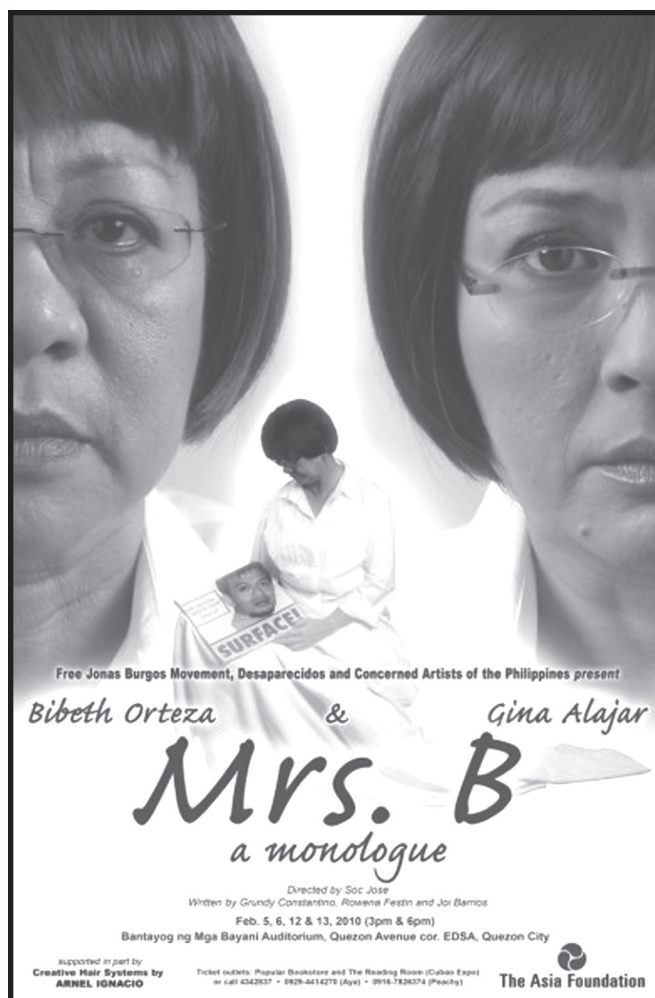
For certain, this review has not captured each and every detail of the story. But it hopes to convey the message about how cruel the crime of enforced disappearance is to the victim, the surviving family, the relatives and friends and the greater society. This review further hopes to tell the people that this issue is not a parochial concern of a family or a group of families of the *desaparecidos* but a social issue that necessitates a collective response. It is a crime that could happen to anybody.

## The Curtain Opens

After a brief introduction by the Deputy Secretary-General of "*Desaparecidos*," Ms. Aya Santos, the curtain opened with a silhouette of Mrs. Burgos praying to the Blessed Virgin Mary with the heavenly background of *Regina Coeli*.<sup>1</sup>

### 5 February 2009, Quezon City, Philippines

– In the audio-visual room of the *Bantayog ng Mga Bayani*<sup>2</sup> which accommodates barely a hundred people, a monologue, entitled "Mrs. B" was played. It depicted the formidable strength of Edita Burgos, mother of Filipino *desaparecido*, Jonas Burgos. Excellently portrayed alternately by actress, Gina Alajar and by director Bibeth Orteza, the presentation manifests Mrs. Burgos' courageous and determined search for her son and for many other *desaparecidos* in a country which has supposedly surpassed the tyrannical and rapacious



Marcos regime. Such inner strength is founded on her profound love for her son and her deep faith in her Creator.

## A Wounded Narrative

It was Easter Sunday, the celebration of the feast of the Risen Christ. The main character started to tell her story as she was preparing for a special lunch for her children. Teacher that she is, she recalled the seven basic food groups. The favorite soup of her dear Jonas did not slip her memory. She went on thinking of *lechon*,<sup>3</sup> one of Jonas' favorite dishes. Her facial expression alternated between joy and pain when she recalled in detail how she gave birth to baby Jonas; how he grew up as a happy child; how he and his brother destroyed their sister's dolls; how he was as a pupil -- assigned to erase black boards, physically active, jolly, and music-minded. She shared how Jonas later grew up as a mature person whose noble purpose was to help the peasantry in their struggle for land and life. She went on further to tell the audience



Photos of Mrs. B's search for her son and rallyists wearing the Jonas' mask. (©Carmela Lapeña)

about how they run the family through a Family Council where important concerns are discussed.

Suddenly, the audience heard the loud sound of a car. It was not simply an ordinary car normally parked and leaving, but it was her regular visitor, who had been keeping an eye on her every movement. As a joke coupled with sarcasm, she bade goodbye to the vehicle. This led her to narrate further her funny yet scary experience when she was tailed by a car in the Diliman campus of the University of the Philippines. While she was going toward the direction of the university shopping center, a lady wearing a skirt, oddly designed with yellow bell flowers, followed her to one of the small restaurants. Obviously pretending to be selling *sineguelas*,<sup>4</sup> the woman got startled, and rushed away leaving the *sineguelas* cluttered all over the floor. She was taken a back at the comment: *Baka naman ma impierno ka na sa ginagawa mong 'yan!* (*You might go to hell for what you are doing!*) An ordinary vendor with a clean conscience would not have been bothered by this statement but the woman's reaction confirmed her questionable identity.

After the incident at the university with "Ms. Yellow Bell Flowers," Mrs. B went on to share about her late husband, press freedom fighter, Jose "Joe" Burgos. Joe and Edita had a mutual admiration for each other. Theirs was a whirlwind romance that immediately led to marriage in 1965, 7 years before the declaration of martial law. Because of the difficult security situation at that time, it was then that she learned by heart the rules to ensure safety and security. **Rule No. 1:** Be observant. When someone follows you, do not flee but observe the persons following you. **Rule No. 2:** Study the details of vehicles. The horrors of martial law flit back to her mind in kaleidoscopic vividness. Press freedom was curtailed. *We Forum* and *Malaya* were closed. There were rallies everywhere. It was then that her children involved themselves in these rallies. Concerned over her family's safety, she herself learned the "art of surveillance." She checked her husband and her children from afar... Her present predicament of being under surveillance by the military is not new to her. With Joe as her husband, she witnessed his life in prison during the dark years of the Marcos dictatorship.

It never occurred to her that years later, she would be, as some people would say, in a worse predicament. She surpassed the tests of martial law. While the experience of martial law was unfair to her as well as to any other victim of human rights violations, the nightmare of Jonas' disappearance in a government which boasts itself to be the champion of human rights in Southeast Asia, is all the more unfair and inhuman.

Mrs. B, who values silence, honesty, justice, courtesy and fortitude, never dreamed that years later, she would be asked by Marie Enriquez, the Secretary-General of KARAPATAN,<sup>5</sup> to be the spokesperson of *Desaparecidos*.

She continued narrating about Jonas confiding to the Family Council regarding his work with the peasants. Her family would have wanted him to be just an ordinary agriculturist, but having been brought up with the value of helping the downtrodden; he could never be told by his family to turn his back on the poor. While reminiscing those good old days, the exasperated Mrs. Burgos, who was waiting for the *lechon*, grumbled: "*Lechon or no lechon, Jonas will not come!*"

Suddenly, in the background, a loud cry was heard: "*Aktibista lang ako, wala akong kasalanan.*" (*I am only an activist. I did not commit any offense.*) A reenactment of Jonas' ordeal was presented on stage. It was then that Mrs. B. poignantly recalled how she missed her son, vowing never ever to forget him for the rest of her life. Looking back, she remembered the last Easter Sunday that he was with her. The reenactment alternately presented Mrs. B. telling about the last phone call of Jonas who spoke with garbled words. The phone call gave some indications that he was drugged. The incident led Mrs. Burgos to cite **Rule No. 3**: In times of surveillance, please make your message clear.

The climax of the story was when Mrs. B. recalled the difficult search for her son -- how she and the rest of her family made all the efforts to find Jonas. They left no stone unturned -- they even looked over at some of the

"*taong grasa*"<sup>6</sup> who could possibly be the disappeared son she is looking for. Not finding him, she turned furious and confronted the perpetrator to produce Jonas. With an angry tone, she cried: "*General Quintoy, ilabas mo ang anak ko!*" (General Quintoy, please surface my son!). Then Mrs. B. showed Jonas' face sketched from the testimonies of witnesses. Furthermore, she expressed her wrath when she fearlessly accused the perpetrators of having been promoted in exchange for the life of her son. She went on to ask: "*May mga anak ba kayo, General?*" (*Do you have sons, General? I pray that what happened to my son does not happen to yours. But remember, the sins of the father will be visited on the heads of his children.*)

Mrs. B. reached the point of no return and cited **Rule No. 4**: "*Huwag matakot, makibaka!*" (Don't be afraid. Dare to struggle!) Her citing this rule manifests Mrs. Burgos' transformation from an ordinary citizen to a courageous human rights defender. She confronted the perpetrators; wrote letters to national authorities; wrote to Pres. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, knocked at the doors of the United Nations and told the world of the disappearance of her son and of the many other victims of human rights violations. While all these efforts have indeed, effectively put across the message that the crime of enforced disappearances continues to happen in broad-day light in a supposedly civilized Philippine society, they miserably failed to physically bring Jonas back to the bosom of his family.

At the apex of her emotions, with faltering voice, Mrs. B. cried and fell: "*Kahit gaano ka katibay, mababasag*



The audience is made to face reality with these posters of *desaparecidos*. (©Carmela Lapeña)



*at mababasag ka rin...."* (No matter how strong you are, you will also break down...) This statement reminds the author of Jesus praying: "Father, if possible, take this cup away from me." This scene reflects that human strength and weakness are not necessarily in contradiction. Overcoming weaknesses manifests formidable strengths that transcend human frailties. This is Mrs. B: a paragon of strength and a source of inspiration and encouragement to the other family members of the disappeared and the rest of society – a constant reminder that in the search for a world without *desaparecidos*, there is no turning back.

Towards the end of the monologue, Mrs. B. turned with admiration to the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which she described as characteristic of courage by literally stepping on a snake. Then she said, while this is a manifestation of Mary's courage, to her, what was more courageous for the Mother of Jesus was when she witnessed her son being severely beaten in the *Via Crucis*<sup>7</sup> and his subsequent violent death and crucifixion.

## A Personal and Collective Call

Raising her fist, Mrs. B made a brave promise: "*Ako ang magiging tinik sa lahat ng mga nangunguha ng anak...*" (I will forever be a thorn to all those who make children disappear ...) Linking arms with her were sons and daughters of the disappeared whose voices eloquently expressed their never ending search for their fathers. They took turns in reciting a litany of the search, to wit:

*"...Ibalik niyo ang bugbog, laspag na katawan.  
Mapaghihilom ng bawat sugat.  
Isauli niyo ang baliw ang isipan  
Mapanumbalik ang katinuan.  
Ibigay niyo sa akin ang pira-pirasong buto.  
Ang gula-gulanit na laman,  
At kahit pa ang bangkay na di na makilala...."*<sup>8</sup>

*(Bring me back the weak and beaten body  
Each wound will heal  
Return to me the insane mind  
It will come back to its sanity.  
Return to me the broken skeletons  
The broken flesh  
And even the corpse that is beyond recognition...)*

They made a call that resonated through the four walls of the venue: Surface the disappeared! Justice for all the *desaparecidos* and all victims of human rights violations. With the real Mrs. B on stage, they linked arms and made an appeal to the audience to join the struggle

to stop enforced disappearances and to put an end to impunity.

The audience noticed an eight-year old child who incessantly sobbed as she did her part in the play, "*Ako ang anak na nagmamahal*." (I am the daughter who loves.) This author later learned that the girl is a niece of Jonas. Her father died when she was a baby and Jonas is her surrogate father.

The child's every tear should lead us not to cold apathy but to courageous participation in this long and lonely fight for a world free from enforced disappearances.

1 *Regina Coeli* is an ancient Latin Marian Hymn of the Christian Church, and one of the four seasonal Marian antiphons of the Blessed Virgin prescribed to be sung or recited in the Liturgy of the Hours at the conclusion of the last hours to be prayed in common that day, typically night prayer (Compline or Vespers). Accessed from Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.

2 *Bantayog ng Mga Bayani* or Monument of Heroes is a place where victims of human rights violations gather for important occasions. In it is a wall where names of *desaparecidos* and other victims of human rights violations are engraved.

3 *Lechon* is a Filipino term for roasted pig which Filipinos eat during special occasions.

4 *Sineguelas* is another one of those "childhood memory fruits" that conjure up images of summer, beach holidays, or hanging out in a neighbor's backyard shooting the breeze and munching on these summer gems. *Sineguelas* (*Spondias purpurea*) or Spanish Plum in English, is a native to Mexico and the western coast of Central and South America. Accessed from <http://www.marketmanila.com>.

5 *KARAPATAN* is an alliance of individuals, groups and organizations working for the promotion and protection of human rights in the Philippines. Its founders and members have been at the forefront of the human rights struggle in the Philippines since the time of Marcos' martial law regime. Accessed from <http://www.karapatan.org>.

6 *Taong grasa* is a term given to beggars who are so dirty. Many of them have been left or have been abandoned by their families.

7 *Via Crucis* is Jesus Christ's Way of the Cross which depicts His passion, death and resurrection.

8 "*Litanya ng Paghahanap*." Is a poem composed by Joi Barrios who was inspired by Edita Burgos' courage and dedicated the poem to her and to other mothers of the disappeared.



Mary Aileen Diez-Bacalso is currently the Secretary-General of the AFAD. Her most outstanding contribution to the fight against impunity was her active participation in the three-year drafting and negotiation process of the UN Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.