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Capturing the Soul of the Philippines

An Interview with *Dogeaters* Playwright Jessica Hagedorn

by Rob Kendt

UNDER AN UNFORGIVING TROPICAL SUN, paramilitaries mingle with beauty queens, the airwaves alternate updates on communist insurgents with long-running radio serials, Catholic icons vie with indigenous superstitions, and martial law overlays a teeming, irrepressible nightlife. A reader wandering into the rich, multilayered world of Jessica Hagedorn’s 1990 novel *Dogeaters*, or a theatregoer encountering the author’s own stage adaptation at the Kirk Douglas Theatre this winter might be forgiven for mistaking the setting for a Latin American banana republic in the late decades of the last century.

In fact, the setting is Manila in the early 1980s, not long before the repressive, U.S.-supported dictator Ferdinand Marcos was brought down. But the Latin American association isn’t coincidental. The Philippines’ unique colonial history has made it a not always harmonious mix of Asian, Spanish and American cultures. As one character quips, “The Philippines spent 400 years in a Spanish convent, and 50 years in Hollywood.”

More significant, though, is the fact that Hagedorn, who was born in the Philippines after World War II and has lived in the United States since the mid-1960s, was openly inspired in the writing of *Dogeaters* by two very different Latin American novelists, Gabriel García Márquez and Manuel Puig. In a recent interview near the Greenwich Village home where she lives, she talked about how the magical realism of Márquez and the pop-culture iconography of Puig helped her forge the kind of polyphonic narrative that could reflect the discordant strands of the Philippines she knew.

“Those writers helped me find a way into that world,” Hagedorn said. “They’re very different kinds of writers, but the Philippines is such a complex culture, you can’t tell it one way alone.”

The narrative’s many voices and interlocking stories are also what ultimately sold Hagedorn on the novel’s theatrical potential. Perhaps because the dreamscapes of movies are so central to many of her characters’ lives — from young lovers who model their romance on Hollywood films to the hustlers who entertain the German auteur Rainer Werner Fassbinder, one of the play’s major supporting characters — Hagedorn had for years imagined *Dogeaters* as a film. She even wrote a screenplay version at one point. But in the late ’90s, the director Michael Greif, then artistic director of La Jolla Playhouse, approached her about adapting the book for his theatre — and convinced her that the stage was the ideal medium for her manifold vision.

“It was eye-opening,” said Hagedorn, who prior to writing the novel *Dogeaters* had worked in the theatre primarily as a multimedia performance artist/poet in the vein of Patti Smith or the young Sam Shepard. “Michael really did bring me back to the theatre, and showed me what was possible with my own work.”

Specifically, she realized that she could put many stories — not to mention the many languages spoken in the Philippines — onstage all at once rather than intercut between them. Indeed, one of the play’s high points is a provocative montage of sex, love and prayer that comes late in the show’s first act. This multi-character scene of coupling and communion was constructed with a poet’s sensibility and honed in rehearsal; its choral effect would be inconceivable on film.



“I knew that was going to be a very crucial moment, and it was hard writing it,” Hagedorn recalled of the scene, which simultaneously depicts performers going through the motions at a sex club, the consummation of two young lovers’ blooming romance, and a devout Catholic prostrating herself before her household saints. “I was trying to juxtapose the sexuality with the extreme religiosity of the culture. How to do that? I had to sort of listen to it almost like a piece of music.”

The hidden backbeat of this extraordinary scene is an infamous 1898 speech by President William McKinley. In it, he called the Philippines “a gift from the gods” that had become his unwanted responsibility, as the U.S. had acquired the islands among the spoils of the Spanish-American War. After much prayer and reflection, McKinley announced that he’d come up with four important conclusions about this new imperial windfall, the last of which was that “there was nothing left for us to do but to...educate the

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Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them."

After much rewriting, Hagedorn ended up snipping out all of McKinley's speech except the numbers highlighting his four points. But, though its paternalist views remain unstated, Hagedorn trusts that the larger thrust of the speech — about the way the Philippines' imperial masters, first the Spanish and then the Americans, colonized and complicated the islands' soul — comes through in the play as a whole.

"Many Americans don't even know this part of history — they're like, 'Really, we owned you?'" Hagedorn said. "It's like amnesia. But I don't blame them, because they're not taught that in their history books in school. They think Spanish-American War and Cuba; they forget about all these other countries, nations and islands."

For director Jon Lawrence Rivera, who mounted the Los Angeles premiere of *Dog eaters* in 2004 at a space in L.A.'s Filipinotown called SIPA (for Search to Involve Pilipino Americans) and who directs the production at the Douglas Theatre, *Dog eaters* has indisputable educational value. But like Hagedorn, Lawrence said he's especially drawn to the piece's theatricality.

"The reason I did the play in the round at SIPA, which we're replicating a little bit at the Douglas, is that I really wanted the audience to be enveloped in the action of play, so it doesn't become just a presentation of events," said Rivera, who was born in the Philippines but left in 1972 when martial law was imposed and his father, a journalist, was blacklisted. "One of the big sports in the Philippines is cockfighting, and it's always in the round; people can see each other across the room."

Rivera hasn't returned to his homeland since he left with his family, and indeed in L.A. he has made his name as artistic director of Playwrights' Arena, where he has nurtured plays by Luis Alfaro, Jean Conomos, Bryan Davidson and Tom Jacobson, among others, but until *Dog eaters* had never directed a play by a Filipino writer.

In taking it on, Rivera also had to take responsibility for the play's intentionally provocative title — a particularly disparaging term for Filipinos that refers to a not uncommon delicacy among Asian peasants.

"I've had many Filipino friends come and see *Dog eaters*, and they say, 'Why did you call it *Dog eaters*?' As if I wrote it!" Rivera said with a laugh. While he admitted that the show doesn't paint a flattering picture of his native country, he said "that's the one thing that really drew me to it — the edginess of it. And it's still very relevant today. There have been changes, but a lot of what's depicted in the play is very much the same."

Indeed, despite the exile of the Marcoses and the election of Corazon Aquino in 1986, the Republic of the Philippines since that time has replayed many of the novel's recurring themes: financial and electoral corruption, near-military coups, and this year a self-serving "state of emergency" declared by president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, which reminded many longtime observers of the bad old days of martial law. Former first lady and notorious shoe collector Imelda Marcos has even returned, serving as a Congresswoman. Said Rivera, "The Philippines is very forgiving."

Hagedorn sees it more bleakly.

"I once did a story for The New York Times on the first elections that were held after Marcos," Hagedorn said. "And I thought, let me not talk to the usual soundbite types, who know what they're supposed to say to me. Let me go out and talk to the jeepney driver and the really hard-luck itinerant farm workers who harvest sugarcane. I went out and said, 'So what does it feel like to have the vote once again?' And they just looked at me like, 'That has nothing to do with me; whoever's in power is not going to change my life and my struggle.' To them it had not made a difference that this dictator had come and gone."

The Philippines, she was quick to add, is certainly not the only country awash in a troubling blend of political cynicism and cultural fantasy.

"*American Idol* is like a Filipino talent show," said Hagedorn. "When I started seeing that on TV with my daughters, I was laughing: 'My God, this is so Filipino!' I gave an interview in the Philippines, in 2003 when I was there, and I said, 'You know, the U.S. is now becoming just like the Philippines.' Movie stars, beauty queens are becoming politicians. You know, I think Paris Hilton will run for President."

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