

*Aktibismo sa Teatro:*  
Representations of Youth Activism in  
Sining Adhika's Online Theatre Plays with  
Critical Discourse Analysis Approach

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**ABSTRACT**

Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed" explicates that theatrical stage is where all actors rehearse for the revolution and social movements. This paper concerns how activism and social movements, rooted from today's plight of Filipinos, conveyed through the online theatrical performances of *Sining ADhika* during the AY 2020-2021. *Sining ADhika* was established as a young campus-based theatre group of Senior High School Department in the Manuel S. Enverga University Foundation, Lucena City, Quezon. In spite of the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, this group of Arts and Design Track students and artists have produced and distributed short and full-length online theatrical plays through their official Facebook page. This study specifically attempts to briefly discuss Philippine activism, particularly in local theatre productions; to identify the themes of all online theatrical plays, including scripts and songs performed; to interpret how the online theatrical plays conveyed activism through the theme of youth in the Philippines; and to discuss these plays in lieu of the political and economic landscape of the Philippines. Appropriating Fairclough's framework (1992), this paper follows the three dimensions of Critical Discourse Analysis: (1) text, (2) discursive practice, and (3) social practice, in analyzing the discourses within *Ako Rin* and *Langit, Lupa... Sino ang Taya?* This study dives deep on how *Sining Adhika* performed online activism and represented critical issues that the Filipino youth experienced during the Duterte administration. Further, Augusto Boal's theory is demystified in analyzing the meanings of activism from the scripts and performed songs of the online theatrical plays.

**Keywords:** *activism, online theatre, COVID-19 pandemic, political theatre, university-based theatre play*

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### Introduction

For Filipinos, performance or drama has been the artistic form quickest to respond to current history (Fernandez, 1987), especially when history leaves people a cathartic story. The Philippine theatre essentially continued the production of social awareness, advocacy, and militancy despite endemic poverty, lack of government subsidies, and pandemic situation. This justifies the very aim of art according to Alice Guillermo in the late 1980s – not to simply render some object or other, but to make it a carrier of meanings (Flores, 2019). And apparently, one of which that theatre performance conveys is activism.

Social activism in Quezon province stems from several acts of oppression and suppression experienced by some of the activists over the past years. These narratives of social activism were staged and conveyed by *Sining ADhika* – a campus-based theatre group of the Senior High School Department in the Manuel S. Enverga University Foundation based in Lucena City, Quezon and established in 2020. This theatrical production is a group of Arts and Design Track students who have started producing short and full-length online theatrical plays in 2020 despite of various constraints brought by the pandemic situation.

This perennial movement of Quezon student-artists solidifies how the performance and art, despite the detrimental effects of the COVID-19 to the global conditions (Brooks & Patel, 2022), were perpetuated regardless of the constraints in mounting theatre productions at the height of the pandemic. The theatre production, including the artists and writers all over the world responded creatively, to the manifold impact of the Corona virus in the world of the Arts in general (Govinden, 2020). He pointed out that there have been many spectacular online plays where creativity and generosity were directed to nurture and sustain hope in a time of crisis.

In the Philippines, the pandemic left its people construe meanings of oppression, injustices, and militancy which respond to Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed". It explicates that theatrical stage is where all actors rehearse for the revolution and social movements. Albeit having several facets, theatre for social change is designed to create community and engage the community in a public sphere or dialogue. Theatre can be used to exemplify the possibilities of and inspire people to pursue social change.

Thus, this paper addresses the concern of how activism is staged and conveyed in online theatrical plays performed by *Sining ADhika*. All the online theatre plays produced from AY 2021-2022 were selected theatrical plays examined in this paper as these plays pioneered the group's goal of becoming its brand as a campus-based theatre production in MSEUF-SHS. Particularly, this research has the following objectives:

1. Discuss briefly Philippine activism especially in local theatre productions;
2. Identify the themes of online theatrical plays produced by *Sining ADhika*, including scripts and songs performed;
3. Interpret how the online theatrical plays conveyed activism through the theme of youth in the Philippines; and
4. Discuss these plays in lieu of the political and economic landscape of the Philippines.

### Review of Related Literature

This section encompasses the critical and pivotal backdrops of activism in the Philippines and how it was propagated due to the political upheavals in the history. Critical transitions and evolutions of activism through artistic narratives, particularly theater productions, are also elucidated across section.

#### The Rise of Staging Activism in the Philippines

Activism in the Philippines has always been an elephant in the room since 1972 when the darkest days of martial law challenged the country's freedom to live and express both in media and on streets (Scalice, 2017). That year, the protest theatre which had begun in the late 1960s—short plays staged in the streets, public plazas, churchyards, and strike picket lines to protest injustice and corruption—was abruptly silenced (Fernandez, 1987).

Inequality, oppression, and domination are terms that are relative to activists but the notion of power as the core of problematic relationships at both macro- and micro-levels is more recent (Medel-Anonuevo, 1996). One breadth of activism—especially in the Philippines—is the unequal power relations between classes or between the state and the people. Eventually, an upsurge of student protests and movements occurred by the late sixties (Jimenez, 2014). From January to March 1970, more violent protest rallies were mounted against the Marcos regime, which came to be known as the First Quarter Storm (Agoncillo, 1990, as cited in Jimenez, 2014).

The University of the Philippines was set as the benchmark of student activism. According to Jimenez (2014), students from nonsectarian schools such as Mapua Institute of Technology, the Far Eastern University, and the Lyceum of the Philippines, and such sectarian schools as De La Salle College, Ateneo de Manila, University of Santo Tomas, and San Beda College joined the protest movements. The justified agitation stretched from Greater Manila to the Visayas and Mindanao (Damo-Santiago, 1972, as cited in Jimenez, 2014). The activists took part in militant organizations such as the Kabataang Makabayan

(Nationalist Youth) and the Movement for Democratic Philippines (MDP), among others. Calderon (1971, as cited in Jimenez, 2014) stated that the radical students eventually held key positions in student publications and student council.

Furthermore, Jimenez (2014) used the structuration theory of Prof. Giddens in analyzing the phenomenon of student activism at the then De La Salle College. The salient points drawn as to why student activism was mounted were: the tuition fee increase that caused rage amongst students in school year 1971-1972; the presence of 'clerico-fascists' in private educational institutions; the Brother Becker case where 600 students staged a four-hour demonstration to cascade support for Becker who was dismissed from the College, the NROTC controversy whereas around 600 cadets did not give a nod to the drill due to their 'dissatisfaction with the present NROTC system as well as the manifestation of their protest against the hazing of Shore Patrol trainees by probationary officers; the reinforcement of their academic freedom and rights; the agitation for a nationalist education; and the campus' elitist orientation.

From then on, students from various campuses empowered themselves in amplifying their plight and advocacies to a broader audience. That was when various meanings of imperialism, injustice, oppression, and liberation finally were decoded to make inferences, draw conclusions, and carry into elusive streets through the form of theatre art (Fernandez, 1987).

According to E. San Juan Jr. (n.d.) as mentioned in Tadem (2020), during the Martial law years, Marcos controlled Filipinos' access and the kind of information they received. He also restrained public scrutiny of the government and ensured he would decide on matters which he claimed were the truth. The years of martial law and its aftermath have been paradoxically the age of maturity for Philippine theatre (Fernandez, 1987), which propelled Filipinos to bring and relive social movements into performative activism, a case in point, the political theatre.

Thimsen (2022) deems performative activism as critical gestures for demands more than condemnations. In their study, it was highlighted that performative activism underlines a critical backdrop which is applied to instances of self-serving support (of the government) for social justice causes. Relative to this, Huarcaya (2015) underscored that those people who bring themselves into theatrical play constitute social reality. Hence, the citizens and the social activists share a considerable amount of plight on stage. These narratives from the citizens and activists have been changed by the information and communication technologies toward a collaborative and engaging political action (Gerbaudo, 2012, as cited in Cervi & Marin-Lladó, 2022). And their study explicates that this media shift has empowered more the disenfranchised and marginalized communities to make their voices heard (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015).

More so, activist art aims to foster dialogue about uncomfortable and overlooked topics; build community; make a place for novel ways of thinking; invite participation amongst its people; transform environment and experience; reveal realities; alter perception through new eyes; create disruption; and inspire dreaming (Duncombe, 2016). Indeed, political and artistic antagonisms were integral to left discourse for a shared purpose of challenging the state.

In the Philippine context, varying narratives of the marginalized communities have been articulated in one artistic form which is the theatrical play. One of the pioneers of Philippine theatre was Severino Montano (1915-1980) who was posthumously appointed “National Artist” by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts. Montano managed in 1950s various measures to promote professional theatre and theatre education in some of the far-flung barrios in his hometown in Manila (Leonhardt, 2019). His successful dramas were *Sabina*, *The Merry Wives of Manila*, and *The Ladies and the Senator*.

The political breadth of Philippine theatre has become more evident during the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century according to Pamela Del Rosario (1994, as cited in Delimata, 2013). The Filipino culture that time was strongly inspired by the theatre tradition of Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*. More so, Del Rosario argued that thinking about theatre should be rather as an important tool in the fight for political and social changes (Delimata, 2013), as what Boal posited in his theory.

According to Delimata (2013), theatre practice has become more political, revolutionary, and calling for social and/or governmental changes. Indeed, theatre is designed to challenge the status quo and call for actions to revolutionize and solve chaos in the society. *Theatre of the Oppressed* solidifies the fact that social change has always been the major aim of the people on the marginalized sectors. Theatre is an art form that empowers the marginalized, the oppressed (Delimata, 2013).

Augusto Boal (2020) further elucidated that to understand the poetics of the oppressed, one must put in mind the main objective, i.e., to change the people – the spectators. The spectators, or the audiences, have these similar thoughts being discussed theatrically on stage through the dramatization of the actors. With this, it is imperative to point out that symbols should be meaningful enough to mirror and communicate the stories of the mass audience.

However, still, according to Fernandez (1987), other playwrights clothed their protest in the robes of traditional theatre with the likes of PETA’s *Panunuluyan* (1979), Nicanor Tiongson’s *Philipinas Circa 1907* (1982), and Bonifacio Ilagan’s *Pagsambang Bayan* (1977), wherein entertainment through traditional formula of song, dance, and romance was on the topmost layer of performance.

Further, PETA, and its social and political concern, did not end up with i.e., the fall of Marcos government (Delimata, 2013). Nowadays, PETA leads several theatre educational programs (i.e., The School of People's Theater), trains young people (PETA Metropolitan Teen Theater League Program, Children's Theater Program, Arts Zone Project) and first of all, its performing arm – the Kalinangan Ensemble – regularly stages play in the PETA Theater Center in Quezon City (Delimata, 2013). As a matter of fact, Rody Vera's *Walang Aray* is the most recent PETA's musical show as it returned for a limited three-weekend run last October 6-22, 2023. The musical comedy show is a story of revolution and romance, nationalism, and bravery (Philippine Educational Theatre Association, 2023).

Another political narrative that was staged pre-pandemic in the Philippines was *Dekada '70* (2020) (Valera, 2020). A Black Box Production's musical adaptation of the late Lualhati Bautista's novel, *Dekada '70* brings the story to a new audience of young, screaming for change generation. Politics, injustice, and history are common topics in theater. The events that inspired the production are the deepest wounds in Philippine history – Martial Law (De Paula, 2020). And given the recent developments in our political landscape, the topics of the musical are still—unfortunately—one of the biggest problems facing society, as told by Director Pat Valera.

*Dekada '70*, albeit having a deeply personal story, resembles bigger issues that challenged the nation and stemmed out activism. It is a theatrical play filled with small, perfect moments that stir big emotions and feelings and transform into something easier to hold, easier to grasp; moments experienced by anyone immensely entrenched in the darkness and uncertainties within and outside the Metro Manila in the 1970s (Nuevo, 2020).

Indeed, activism has always been an evident social practice in the Philippines since 1972 and has been empowered during the administration of Rodrigo Duterte.

### Quarantined Activism and the Online Theatre

In parts of Southeast Asia, the rise of authoritarian regimes has created conditions of impunity in which state and non-state actors have exploited restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic to restrain activism, contain indigenous livelihoods, and intensify resource exploitation (Dressler, 2021). Indeed, the Corona virus has left such hindsight in the performing arts industry. Spiro et al. (2020) highlighted that the COVID-19-related restrictions exacerbated the already precarious conditions of employment in the industry while they also intensified the artists' feelings of job insecurity and instability.

Meanwhile, Filipinos could not deny the fact that during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, freedom and rights were stretched and strongly challenged by Duterte administration. In 2020, the United Nation's Human Rights Council

released a damning report stating that, between 2015 and 2019, at least 248 human rights and environmental defenders had been murdered in their pursuit of social and environmental justice in the Philippines (OHCHR, 2020). According to Dressler (2021), the incidents of harassment, intimidation and murder of so-called leftist defenders have increased considerably since President Duterte assumed office. Elected in 2016, Duterte deliberately used vulgar, sexist, confrontational and violent language to demonstrate their charisma and power to get the 'job done' at any cost (e.g., controlling crime and activism) and to distance themselves from the 'political establishment', despite themselves often being political elites from wealthy, well-established families (Dressler, 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Duterte administration seemed to have exacerbated the situation when violence against defenders has taken on new atmospheric dimensions. Under Duterte's rule, COVID-19 has further driven complex violent atmospheres involving viral clouds, transmission, infection, and containment of activists and others in civil society already marginalized by the ruling elite and the state's security apparatus (Dressler, 2021).

While people are grappling with the global pandemic, activism or—at least—being proactive has been quarantined in the country since Anti-Terror Law. In the lead up to the Duterte government's signing of the Anti-Terrorism Act (RA No 11479) (Official Gazette, 2020) into law on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July, 2020, human rights and environmental defenders contended with the convergence of intensifying red-tagging and the violent atmosphere of COVID-19 (Patag, 2021).

In areas where human rights and environmental activism overlap with police or paramilitary guarding mines, plantations or major infrastructure and military-led counter-insurgency campaigns, ECQ restrictions have been accompanied by military and police surveillance, harassment, and arrests (Jennings, 2020, as cited in Dressler, 2021). Once in lockdown, many activists have received unexpected and unwanted visits from enforcement units with violent consequences. According to Dressler (2021), many arrests have occurred at police checkpoints at so-called quarantine 'boundary zones' or during household visits late at night while 'suspects' were sleeping under lockdown.

In addition, despite a global coronavirus pandemic, and a declaration by the President of a unilateral ceasefire between government forces and the revolutionary New People's Army (NPA), rights group Karapatan said soldiers of the 85th Infantry Battalion in Quezon province still found the time to harass local farmers (Umali, 2020). According to report of Umali (2020), harassment and red-tagging incidents reported by Karapatan-Quezon despite a global coronavirus pandemic in municipalities of Lopez, Catanauan, Macalelon, Unisan, Agdangan, Padre Burgos, and Atimonan.



This underscores that despite the constraints in staging theatrical plays brought by the global pandemic, if social awareness is at stake especially when activism is stretched, theatre narrative must be perpetuated with the use of any platform available. At the time of the global pandemic, articulating narratives of activism was indeed perennial when artists managed to capitalize the online media for their sole purpose. However, in a study cited in Brooks and Patel (2022), creative arts professionals across the globe felt the creative arts sector was devalued, misunderstood, and ignored even before the pandemic, and these hunches were exacerbated by the pandemic itself (Spiro et al., 2020).

According to Doerr et al. (2022, as cited in Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2022), digital activism is deemed as a form of political participation in the digital realm since the social media platforms were already regarded as ongoing “sites of struggle”. Further, Flannery, a participant from a study by Siciliano (2021), revealed that through her experiences teaching camps and conversations, she started to believe that online platforms during a global pandemic are effective as teaching, learning, and performing tools for theatre.

Domestic narratives of Filipinos through online theatre were made accessible during the pandemic and amidst the Duterte administration. After its successful runs in 2019, *Ang Huling El Bimbo* (2019) was streamed online in 2020 for public viewing (Bernardino, 2020). It is a musical play that draws from the Eraserheads’ songbook. Certainly, the play resonates with those of the ‘90s moments – the plaid fabrics, the baggy clothes, the university culture. Basically, it tackles the life of different people in the ‘90s.

It speaks volume about silence being oppressive where it exposes how ill-equipped people are when dealt with a reverberating situation of sexual assault. There is a criticism in men’s silence in violence. Silence is essentially oppressive because it privileges order and harmony over someone’s trauma.

Another salient and critical point drawn from *Ang Huling El Bimbo* is how it capitalizes in what Brillante Mendoza (2021) called as “poverty porn” as “supreme art” rather than what they simply are. Mendizabal (2020) emphasized that the social angling of the latter scenes had challenged the middle-class audiences to cry against historical revisionism at the expense of sympathy to men.

*Makinal*, another theatre play streamed online in 2020, is the UP Laboratory’s adaptation of *Machinal*. This is a story with effective visuals and sounds improvisations. The storyline revolves around Helen, an employee of a patriarch boss named Mr. Jimenez. This play has conveyed the realities that our society is unfortunately facing today, particularly the inferiority of women and their stolen freedom. It showed social injustice in women and how suffocating it is to live in a world run by the belief that women are restricted for freedom. It has challenged



the status quo of the role of women in this functioning society, and how these people begged for their own freedom (Said, 2019).

According to Theatre Fans Manila (2021), student organizations from five universities produced via online a trilogy production, a theatre festival, and a series of Filipino plays last March 2021. The Maze Trilogy by the Polytechnic University of the Philippines Sining-Lahi Polyrepertory featured *Wangwang*, *Coffee Break*, and *Solo* (2021). Entablado of the University of the Philippines Diliman produced an online theatre festival with titles including *3SAM* (2021), *Apat na Kaluluwa sa Loob ng Ari ng Ama* (2021), and *Over a Cup of Coffee* (2021). The present-day adaptation of Sophocles' classic *Oedipus Rex* was streamed online by *Tanghalang Ateneo* with new title *Password:03dlpu5\_R3x* (2021). Originally slated in February 2021, *VEER@US: Tetralohiyang Hinaing na Ibaling ang Pansin sa Atin* (2021) by Ateneo's ENTABLAD was streamed online sometime in March 2021. Lastly, *Kung Paano Maghiwalay* (2021) by Far Eastern University Theatre Guild staged online the Egg Theatre Company's original piece.

The themes of the university-based online theatrical plays delved into raising awareness on the LGBT+ community's struggles, mental health, grief, the battle against HIV/AIDS, alternate possibilities, moral responsibility, crime, politics, romance and break ups, redemption, and many other socio-political issues (Theatre Fans Manila, 2021).

### Methodology

Discourse generally refers to spoken language or forms of speech (van Dijk, 1997, p. 1 as cited in Lanuza, 2020). In a deeper theoretical point of view, discourse consists of three essential elements: (1) language use, (2) the communication of beliefs, and (3) interactions in a social situation (van Dijk, 1997, p. 2 as cited in Lanuza, 2020).

Appropriating the current trends of critical discourse analysis, this paper will explore how activism is staged and conveyed in online theatrical plays performed by *Sining ADhika* from First Semester to Second Semester of AY 2020-2021. Discourse, popularized by Foucault has broadened its breadth through time (Adams, 2017). The analysis of discourse is not only limited to the analysis of spoken words but also how these spoken words shape the meanings that people believe based on the cultural worldview they share (Fairclough, 1992). Discourse is more than the study of language; it delves on how the use of language can affect certain actions upon others or create events (Johnstone, 2008, as cited in Lanuza, 2020). Hence, Fairclough (1992) explicates discourse as a form of social practice, social event, and social structure, rather than a purely individual activity or a reflex of situational variables. Following Fairclough (1992), this study followed

the three dimensions of Critical Discourse Analysis such as (1) text, (2) discursive practice, and (3) social practice.

**Text.** This study looked at the common and recurring themes and categories extracted from the spoken dialogues and performed songs of *Sining ADhika*. The main focus here are the produced online theatrical plays during the AY 2020-2021: *Ako Rin* and *Langit, Lupa... Sino Ang Taya?*

**Discursive practice.** Meanings from the online theatrical plays were subject to interpretations and placed in the hierarchy of text. Discourse does not only elucidate sense of understanding and comprehensively inferring from the resources of the community, but also challenging the received and existing linguistic rules and cultural orientations. Thus, an online interview with the production team was conducted to demystify and flesh out critical insights from the point-of-view of the artists themselves, and find the common ground between the text and their perspective.

**Discourse as social practice.** Studying *Sining ADhika*'s online theatrical plays entails understanding the language in theatre and how they communicate the message of activism to their audience and to the people in general. The political and economic implications of the online theatrical plays will provide more ground-breaking standpoint for radical social movements.

More so, Augusto Boal's theory, "Theatre of the Oppressed", will discern the construed meanings of activism from the scripts and performed songs of the online theatrical plays.

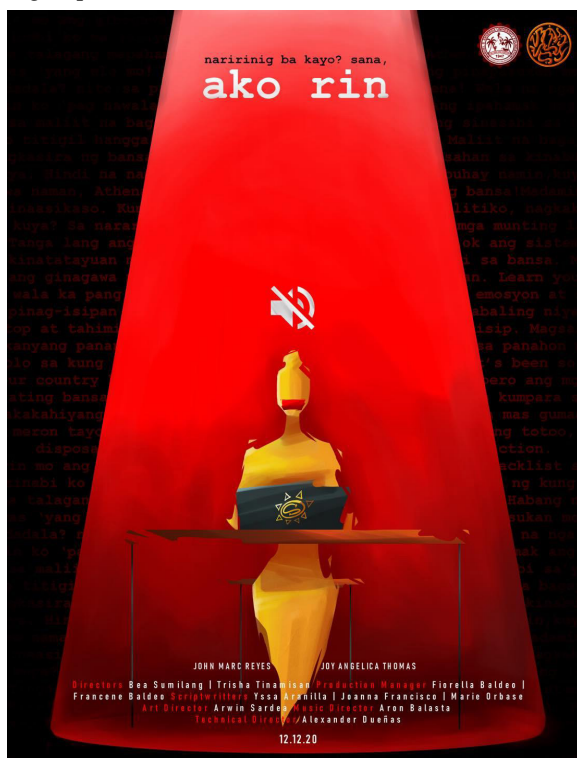
## Results and Discussion

This paper extracted several themes and categories (text) from the spoken dialogues and performed songs of *Ako Rin* and *Langit, Lupa... Sino Ang Taya?* such as: superiority amongst youth, ignorance, effect on the family, government's self-interest, same-sex relationship, hierarchy of classes, social injustices, and law being unfair, among others.

*Ako Rin*, with running time of 18 minutes and 50 seconds, was exhibited online via the *Sining ADhika* Facebook page (<https://web.facebook.com/siningadhikaproduksyon>) on December 14, 2020. This almost 20-minute online theatre play is a musical narrative about the two siblings *Eman* and *Athena*. They both grapple with the rage outside (the society) and within their homes (internal conflicts). *Eman* is part of the police authority during the Duterte administration while *Athena* is an artist and student activist who perpetuates social movement even through the online platform. They both enforce their own beliefs coming from two different perspectives. However, they are both coming from the same conditions of the Philippine society.

Figure 1

*Ako Rin official digital poster*



Note: This is the official digital poster of *Ako Rin* which was released via online last November 23, 2020. However, there were other publicity materials released (e.g., teaser photo, teaser video, and official trailer).

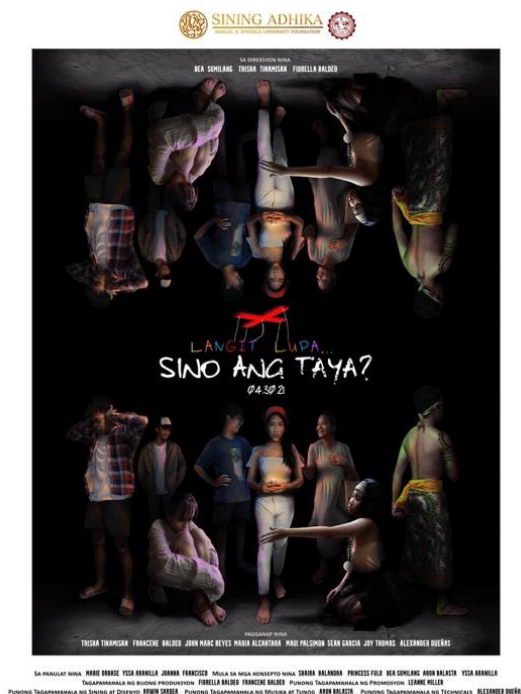
Meanwhile, *Langit, Lupa... Sino ang Taya?* is a 50-minute online musical play about persistence, truth, love, and rage. This play focuses on one main character named as *Guita*; her existence is represented by other characters who live in other epochs. The striking core of *Guita*'s character is that, she has been persistently withstanding the challenges brought by her society, but living an ideal life has ever been elusive with the kind of government she—and her other representations—has been dealing with. The play shows how the *Philippines* is being visually and musically represented through *Guita*. This online theatre was released via their Facebook page on April 30, 2021.

Albeit the different extracted codes and themes from the two online theatrical plays, the only focus of this analysis is the most overarching key theme – the youth generation. Throughout this analysis, youth is discussed as how it is

intertwined with narratives of activism and oppression involving the family, the government, and the society at large.

Figure 2

*Langit, Lupa... Sino ang Taya?* official digital poster



*Note:* This is the official digital poster of *Langit, Lupa... Sino ang Taya?* which was released via online last April 12, 2021. However, there were other publicity materials released (e.g., teaser photos, countdown pubmats, teaser videos, and official trailer).

The researcher needed to involve the major production members of *Sining Adhika* to draw forth interpretive insights as to how the two online theatrical plays were written and produced. The main production roles were interviewed to solicit their motivations rooted from their personal, social, and political inclinations.

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Table 1

*Profile of the participants*

Name	Production Role	Age	Sex
Fiorella Baldeo	Director-Writer	19	Female
Bea Sumilang	Director	19	Female
Yssa Aranilla	Scriptwriter	20	Female
Aron Balasta	Songwriter	19	Male
Francene Baldeo	Actor-Songwriter	19	Female

*Note:* This table only presents the major production roles, but there were other students/artists who put life in other production roles and responsibilities.

Table 1 shows the profile of four major production members who participated in the interview and were the core members of *Sining ADhika*. Fiorella Baldeo, 19 and the director-writer, Bea Sumilang, 19 and director, Yssa Aranilla, 20 and the scriptwriter, and Francene Baldeo, 19 and an actor-songwriter, were all female members. Meanwhile, Aron Balasta, 19 and male, was one of the songwriters. The researcher conducted the online interview last December 30, 2021 via Facebook Messenger videocall and Zoom meeting. The transcripts of each interview were written down to flesh out more interpretive insights and rationale about the production of two online theatrical plays.

The production roles of these female and male members imply the participation of the youth in exhibiting national awareness and consciousness about the socio-political issues surrounding them.

### Youth Generation

In *Ako Rin*, one of the common themes under youth generation is **threat to the youth**. Production team members Yssa Aranilla, Aron Balasta, Bea Sumilang and Francene Baldeo perceived activism as brought by the history, a call for social change, and a way to convey the plight of the masses. Meanwhile, Fiorella Baldeo believed that activism could be articulated through theatre as a revolutionary form of art:

*Natandaan ko mula sa aking guro na ang teatro ay rebolusyonaryo, ito ay para sa pagbabago. Kung kaya't ang teatro ay maaring maging mabisang outlet para mailahad ang mga hinaing at iba't ibang nais iparating sa pamamaraan ng entertainment. (F. Baldeo, personal communication, December 30, 2021)*

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[I recall from my teacher that theater is revolutionary, it is for change. Thus, theater can be utilized as an outlet to proclaim our calls for change through entertainment.]

In addition, Balasta (personal communication, December 30, 2021) stated that online theatre plays a pivotal role to youth narratives such as the “plight of the youth in the society”:

*Sapagkat ang teatro ay sumasalamín sa tunay na buhay. Layunin nitong magpalaganap, maipakita, at maipahayag ang mga kaganapan na kasalukuyang nagaganap sa ating lipunan.*

[For theater mirrors real life. It aims to promote, show, and proclaim current events in society.]

The production team posited meanings as to how the youth of this generation was compelled to enforce their right to expression through online theatre. Red tagging, deemed as threat to the youth by the production members, was the major theme of the online theatre play for it is the social reality today that has to be conveyed to the people; there have been overwhelming injustices in the streets and activism has been quarantined since the enactment of the Anti-Terror Law the fundamental right and freedom of speech has been challenged; and the theatrical play aimed to amplify the voices and current experiences of the Filipinos who are red-tagged (personal communication, Baldeo, F. et al., December 30, 2021).

As can be seen in *Eman*'s line below, threat was evident and perceived by *Athena*:

*Di ba't sinabi ko na sa iyo na itigil mo na 'yang pagpo-post mo ng kung anu-ano?! Gusto mo ba talagang mapahamak kang bata ka? (Aranilla, 2020)*

[Didn't I tell you to stop posting nonsense?! Do you want to get in trouble?]

*Ako Rin*'s *Athena* and *Eman* – the two lead roles – represented varied characters and realities in the Philippines today. *Athena* represented those Filipinos who are critical of the government's erroneous administration; those empowered women who were once undervalued and dominated by men; the youth who are aggressively oppressed in speaking for truth; and the young generation who continuously calls for social change and social justice. *Eman*'s character represented the likes of Bong Go to President Duterte who seems to be a constant follower during his presidency; those who are blinded and who choose to be blinded by the

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government; the reality that choosing family's security in exchange of exercising the freedom to speak up is a lesser evil; and those older generation who are and who chose to be apolitical in spite of the blatant social injustices today.

Meanwhile, in *Langit, Lupa... Sino ang Taya?*, psychological trauma was one specific theme categorized under youth generation. As seen in *Soledad's* line below, emotional anguish was exhibited:

*Anong kaaway? Kuya, baka nakakalimutan mo naman na matagal na panahon na ang lumipas mula noong tayo ay nakaligtas sa giyera.*  
(Aranilla, 2020)

[What foe? Kuya, have you forgotten how many years have passed since we've survived the war?]

In relation, the youth who have experienced a traumatic experience suffers from mental health challenge as explained by the production team:

*Ang parte ng kantang ito ay inawit ni Soledad kung saan siya ay isang biktima ng giyera at kung saan nagkaroon siya ng PTSD o traumatic experiences na gumagambala sa kanya araw-araw.* (F. Baldeo, personal communication, December 30, 2021)

[This part of the song was sung by Soledad, where she was a victim of war and had PTSD or traumatic experience which haunts her everyday.]

This threat to the youth resembles the socio-political conditions in the country during the administration of Duterte which were also revealed as the specific codes and themes in both online theatre plays: red-tagging, war on drugs, and psychological distress.

It is imperative to highlight the anguish caused by red tagging amongst the journalists and activists who stood their ground and remained vigilant amidst Duterte government. While the spontaneous rage of citizens and their responses to pandemic did not falter, the red-tagging spree in the country did not stumble. According to Wong (2021), the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF ELCAC) insistently claimed that communist sympathizers were the people behind the so-called humanitarian act through community pantries which sprouted as people's initiatives to give mutual aid to their communities. Ana Patricia Non, the one who first initiated the community pantry in Quezon City during the hit of the global pandemic, expressed her upheaval and stress for her and her family's safety upon being falsely identified that she has ties with the communists (Antonio, 2021).



Further, it has been embedded in Philippine history the highly punitive approach of the then-president Rodrigo Duterte to illegal drug cases in the country. In a study report by Timberman (2019), the records of death, per the police, were the hindsight of the suspects resisting arrest. However, concrete evidence from journalists and human rights groups explicated that the records of death were the echoes of extra-judicial killings (EJK). Identifying the number of EJK victims was a ferocious battle since according to Timberman (2019), the Philippine National Police (PNP) intentionally obscured the data. However, based on a report by Conde (2020), the PNP has already killed more than 5,600 people—who were targeted and inadvertently shot—during anti-drug operations between 2016 up until January 2020. This horrific consequence of the drug war reverberates the case of 17-year-old Kian delos Santos in 2017—captured through CCTV—which sanctioned the three police officers by criminal conviction. This drug war threat to the youth—and the Filipinos in general—violates the both the Philippine Constitution and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Timberman, 2019), hence the United Nation’s top human rights body’s independent international investigation into the “drug war” killings (Conde, 2020).

This drug war threat has seriously left another layer of threat to the children who have witnessed violence against their loved ones (EJK victims) – psychological distress. In a study by Conde (2020), Jenifer M. whose father was killed by police officers in December 2016; the children of Renato A. who was killed in the same year; Kyle R. who was not able to witness firsthand the death of his father in November 2016; the children of Julian R. who was killed by motorcycle-riding gunmen in 2017; and the children of Hamed U. who was killed in 2019 have experienced a cathartic and profound psychological trauma. Unfortunately, according to the same study in 2020, the government has not adopted nor developed any specific program to address the mental health challenge which exacerbated the plight of the Filipino children given the lingering psychological conditions.

Superiority amongst youth is another common theme that was extracted through the online theatrical plays under youth generation. Both plays visually elucidated that this sense of superiority amongst the youth usually happens within a household where the family members challenge the fortitude of youth’s principle. As seen in one line from *Ako Rin* below, superiority—ushered by pessimistic view—was evident with how *Eman* had his discourse with *Athena*:

*ATHENA, malayo ang kinatatayuan mo sa kung ano ang tunay na nangyayari sa bansa. Mas mabuting itigil mo na ang ginagawa mo, bilang*

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*isa sa mga boses ng kabataan. Learn your place. Bata ka pa lang, wala ka pang alam. (Aranilla, 2020)*

[Athena, your stance is far different from what is truly happening in the country. You better stop assuming the role of the voice of the youth. Learn your place. You're too young, you don't know anything.]

The element of superiority equates with the implications of activism to the family of the youth. In *Ako Rin*, the scripts and songs revealed that the probable effects of activism to the family and familial concern topped all the categories. Balasta demystified his insights on how the play presented the effect of activism to the family, hence the superiority amongst youth:

*Wala s'yang magawa dahil na rin sa mga banta ay wala s'yang opsyon, kundi maaaring madamay at masaktan ang mga taong nasa paligid at mahal nya sa buhay tulad nalang ni Athena. (A. Balasta, personal communication, December 30, 2021)*

[He can't do anything, and because of the threats, he doesn't have any option, or else his loved ones will be hurt, as what happened to Athena.]

*Ako Rin* and its production team's perception towards activism expound on how the family of activists experienced the threat brought by the proactive movements of the activists. More so, according to Francene Baldeo, *Eman* represents those members of the family and the society who remain apolitical despite the blatant injustices and inequalities in the society. Being apolitical, therefore, could be tantamount to their response of being superior in thinking. According to Baldeo, "*Eman* represented the older generation of citizens who chose not to meddle with politics and leave things as they thought they should" (personal communication, December 30, 2021).

The consistent character of *Eman* in the play solidifies the need for the youth today – like *Athena* – to draw a deeper sense of national consciousness and awareness from how the older generation perceives the society at present. One of the writers of the online theatre cascaded through the talkback her interpretive thoughts the importance of focusing on national consciousness and awareness which the youth seemingly have within themselves more than the older ones have in them:

*Ito ay kadalasang binabanggit sa aming mga kabataan lalo na at naranasan ko na rin itong isyung ito. At ang masasabi ko lamang ay*

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*nagkakamali sila. Ngayon, ang mga kabataan pa ang may mas madaming alam na katotohanan kesa sa mga nagmamarunong na matatanda. (Y. Aranilla, personal communication, December 30, 2021)*

[This is often told to us, youth, especially that I have experienced this, as well. All I can say is they are wrong. Nowadays, us youth know the truth more than adults who are know-it-alls.]

More so, the subjects explicated the theatrical texts as a form of youth empowerment whereas “art as the conveyor of truth” (Y. Aranilla, personal communication, December 30, 2021). Youth empowerment as the main theme in the online theatrical play was successfully conveyed because of various challenges faced by the youth today – where their activism is rooted from – such as superiority complex from the older generation, invalidated thoughts and emotions, and oppressive actions after being critical and threatened by the enacted Anti-Terror Law in 2020.

Albeit the successful portrayal of youth empowerment in the online plays, another struggle of the characters in *Langit, Lupa... Sino ang Taya?* is the same-sex relationship – which has been dominated by superior notions entrenched in the cultural life of people. *Apolaki*, who loved someone from his same sex, exuded that there is power in authority, freedom is not absolute at all, despair for love’s sake, and that, same-sex love is still a critical issue to address today:

*Minsan na rin akong umibig, sinta. Siya’y makisig na lalaki. Mahal namin ang isa’t isa noon kagaya ng ating pagmamahalan. Ngunit ako’y kanyang iniwan din sa dulo ng aming walang hanggan.*

[I have once loved, beloved. He was a handsome man. We have loved each other the way we now love each other. But he has left me at the end of our forever.]

This superiority amongst youth is a perennial struggle (Alqaseer & Pile, 2020) for the Filipino youth generation especially during the Duterte administration. It mirrors the socio-political conditions in the society which were also revealed as the specific codes and themes in both online theatre plays: youth activism and gender empowerment.

It is worth noting how the millennials enforced their right to speak when Duterte has cursed world leaders and threatened to kill criminals (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Shibby de Guzman, 13, and other young activists screamed out for the end of extrajudicial killings amidst drug war. Akbayan Youth Shama Bulangis, 22, explicated that their form of activism is their way of empowering their families to speak up for themselves at time of constraints and oppression.

Youth activism has become more aggressive and palpable when many were killed and arrested all over the country in one day alone last March 07, 2021. It was then regarded as “Bloody Sunday” when at least nine activists’ lives were put into a perpetual halt by the police and military (Gavilan, 2021).

From bloody battle in activism, the struggle of different genders has still been a ferocious battle. Filipinos couldn’t deny that one selling point of Rodrigo Duterte in his presidential campaign was his support for and liberal views on the members of LGBTQIA+ community. In a CNN report of Andone and Faidell (2017), he said at a conference in Davao City that everybody from the community will be safe and regarded as a human being. However, amidst his presidency, Duterte has often verbalized terms such as “bakla” and “bayot” which both mean gay, as insulting remark to his political enemies. Thus, he has been perceived as inconsistent on his views on homosexuality when he implied in his speech in Japan that “being gay is a disease” (Ranada, 2019).

Records of social injustices and human rights violations during the Duterte administration have undeniably caused traumatic upheaval in the country’s socio-political landscape today. This section purports to discuss another common theme which was fleshed out of the theatrical narratives: hindsight of social injustices.

Indeed, from these lines of *Maya* to *Apolaki* in *Langit, Lupa... Sino ang Taya?*, social stratification continues to interfere in a romantic relationship representing the realities of the society. This is one of the stories that the production team eyed to mount on in an online platform. As one of the participants mentioned, “Goal *po talaga ng production na mag-cater ng* various stories of hierarchy of social classes *na super relevant lalo sa panahon ngayon*” [it is our goal to cater various stories of heirarchy of social classes as it is relevant today] (A. Balasta, personal communication, December 30, 2021).

*Aling Seling*, mother of *Dex* (other characters), clearly demonstrated in her character and story the social injustices evident today, the need to challenge the current system, the responsibility to confront the social condition, and the unfair and unjust society. *Dex* showed how the policemen are deemed as the authority for security, the country’s poor justice system, corruption, and injustices evident between the police officers and the ordinary Filipinos, and the personal interest vested in government.

One of the writers was fully aware of the social injustices the Filipino people have been experiencing especially at the height of the pandemic, hence, the online theatrical play. As Aranilla stated “*Sobra na po ‘yung social injustices na nakikita or nababalitaan natin sa paligid, sa news, at sa iba pang medium*” [social injustices has been rampant that we see and hear about them everywhere, in the news, and other forms of media] (personal communication, December 30, 2021).

*Guita's* character as the lead role in the play was also elucidated as the representation of various realities in the country today – stories resonating to Filipino families and society.

Since *Guita* represents our country, she said this for she no longer wants to stay silent how poor she became and that her children (Filipino) barely even care about it. She wanted to slap us with hard truth and open our eyes to reality. (Y. Aranilla, personal communication, December 30, 2021)

The main character *Guita's* final striking lines essentially displayed varied meanings and interpretations amongst the subjects. There has been no significant change in the country in terms of justice system since the history; the realities in the plight of the masses should always be narrated to the next generation; there are Filipinos who keep on turning a blind eye on the government's mishaps; and perpetual narratives of oppression, activism, and social change should be performed.

Despite the wicked situation of the country which was portrayed by the online theatrical play, its official soundtrack *Panahon* creates sense of hope; aims to exercise the absolute freedom to live and express; creates movement towards social change; and encourages its audience to still manifest their dream not only for themselves but for the society.

The hindsight of social injustices has led to socio-political and economic upheaval of the Philippines during Duterte government. More than this, the hindsight has clearly posted lingering impacts to the youth in today's epoch. These manifestations were also revealed as the specific codes and themes in both online theatre plays: anti-terror law, press freedom, education, and COVID-19 pandemic.

The Anti-Terrorism Act (RA No 11479), passed into law on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July, 2020, has still been negated by human rights advocates and lawyers, and environmental defenders with the convergence of intensifying red-tagging and the violent milieu of COVID-19 (Dressler, 2021). Relative to this intimidation, Filipinos cannot deny the media repression in 2020 when the ABS-CBN bid for franchise renewal was denied during the Duterte administration. The press freedom continues to be threatened and cathartic as one of the President's allies in the House of Representatives blocked the return of the media giant. More so, shortly after his assumption of the presidency, the Court of Appeals upheld the cyber libel convictions of Nobel Prize laureate Maria Ressa and former Rappler writer Reynaldo Santos Jr. (Lo, 2022).

Filipino youth were also affected, in terms of education, by how the COVID-19 pandemic was handled by the Duterte government. It has been imprinted on their core memory the horrific education state of the country amidst the global pandemic. According to IBON Foundation (2021), Duterte has failed to provide sound measures in education. Many considerations in the sudden shift of learning were overlooked: the low-income families, lack of money to buy gadgets for the online classes, inconducive learning environment, *Ligtas na Balik-eskwela* [safe return to schools], among others. Furthermore, in his final report to the nation—the longest SONA in Philippine’s history—Duterte made no discussion on other plans to mitigate constraints in education whereas the schools, teachers, and students were immensely affected (Deiparine, 2021).

Since social injustices have been mundane in his administration, Duterte’s mismanagement of the pandemic could be regarded as the major economic blunder. According to Chikiamco (2021), the government’s militaristic response in 2020 to the pandemic has caused not only emotional anguish and turmoil amongst the youth, but also the worst contraction of the economic state in decades. Worse, the vehemently executed response of the police and military did not even yield any significant public health benefit.

Indeed, *Sining ADhika*’s online theatrical plays were designed to challenge the status quo and call for actions to revolutionize and solve chaos in the society, as theatre practice has become more political, revolutionary, and calling for social and/or governmental changes (Delimata, 2013). Online theatre has emerged as an avenue for people to stir dialogues of hope and change in this challenging time.

The scriptwriter of the production team emphasized “Ito rin, ang teatro, ang maaring magsilbing liwanag sa mga napapaghinaan ng ilaw sa panahon ng pandemya sapagkat aminin na natin na nakakabugnot at depressing itong mga panahong ito.” (Y. Aranilla, personal communication, December 30, 2021)

Aranilla (personal communication, December 30, 2021) also solidifies that art should not conform but rather be critical of the history and current plight of the masses (Flores, 2019), “*Ang pagtigil ng pagsusulat at pagkukuwento ay nangangahulugan lamang na wala nang kaganapan sa ting bayan*” [Ceasing to write and tell stories mean that nothing is happening in the country].

In response to Augusto Boal’s “Theatre of the Oppressed”, the socio-political issues in our government mentioned above were performed as a gesture of activism in the online theatrical play. Hence, the online theatrical plays evidently served as a rehearsal for a revolution in creating social change – that revolution resonated last May 2022 during the National Elections where activists campaigned and rallied behind their presidential bets. Indeed, *Panahon*, one of the official soundtracks used in the online theatre, serves as a reminder that resiliency

is not a destination, but rather a motivation and tool of Filipinos in challenging the future leaders to demystify accountability and responsibility in governance.

### Conclusion

This paper has analyzed that activism through *Sining ADhika* stems from history, oppression, and plight of the Filipino masses which resonate political inclination with the people. From theatre, activism is quintessential in creating social change and revolution through social participation in the communities and involvement in decision-making. Meanwhile, this paper, which reduced theatre as a discourse, suggests to future researchers to delve in visual and aesthetic studies as a lens in analyzing further the theatrical productions of *Sining ADhika*.

The rise of online theatre during the hit of the global pandemic, albeit constraints in audience reception and access, justifies that activism is even more needed to convey to the public and make them experience the first-hand plight of the masses through online theatrical plays. From the narratives of youth activism displayed both in *Ako Rin* and *Langit, Lupa... Sino ang Taya?*, different characters of youth were portrayed: agitated by the government mishaps and loopholes, inspired to speak up and amplify more voices of the masses, and bold enough to uncover the multi-layered persona of the youth today. Albeit having varied portrayals of youth in both online theatre plays, one paramount motivation of the youth is to represent the Philippines in its most vulnerable, horrific, and cathartic state, and not padded by lies and intimidation.

This is where the Filipino youth today could draw immense inspiration to collect every piece of courage and collate all the amounts of rage to stage a revolution; and to help explicate to those who hide from the shadows of anguish that revolution is no longer a rehearsal – *but a reality*.



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