



matayog ang PANGARAP

How celebrities are contributing to the education of public school children **BY SONY NG**



“Public school students are better behaved, more appreciative... a more worthwhile audience.”

Celeste Legaspi hardly needs introduction. An award-winning veteran of the Philippine music industry and one of its most accomplished singers, she is probably best known for the singing and popularizing the infectiously likeable hit songs “Mamang Sorbetero” and “Saranggola ni Pepe,” which generations of children have sung and re-enacted in dance recitals, talent shows, and school programs.

But Celeste doesn't just sing. Her passion and beliefs have involved her

in environmental concerns, supporting the growth of original Filipino music, producing worthwhile entertainment, and recently, opening the minds of public school children—all of which have contributed to her receiving the prestigious TOWNS (The Outstanding Women in the Nation's Service) award.

Theater for public schools

Celeste is a co-founder of Musical Theater Philippines (Musicat), a theater company dedicated to producing origi-

nal plays and musicals for the Philippine stage. In 1997, Celeste and Musicat went one step further. On their 10th year and fourth production, it was dawning on them that their audience base wasn't growing—the same set of people came to watch their shows.

“One day, we realized that we have to help develop the trend of audience that we will have in the future. We wanted to enlarge the market,” she relates. Then the big idea came: to tap public schools and help students appreciate and even learn from original local productions. It was also a way to provide the children with wholesome, worthwhile entertainment that was original, of lasting value, and Filipino. “But we knew that public school children wouldn't be able to do this on their own,” continues Celeste. Musicat had to develop a way for these children to watch the productions for free. This is how the Musicat Angels Program was born.

Celebrities for a cause

Together with talent manager Girlie Rodis, Celeste looked for “angels” who would be able to sponsor the theater-going experience of public school students. In the beginning, they tapped people they knew. Celebs like Regine Velasquez, Jose Mari Chan, Mikee Cojuangco, Noel Trinidad and Armida Siguion-Reyna, not to mention other private individuals, gave freely from their own pockets to pay for the transportation, theater tickets, and even *merienda* of the kids.

Once the Angels Program was in place, large companies were sponsoring public schools. Sometimes, with available funds, Musicat would even stage an entire show especially for the Angels Program, with every seat in the theater occupied by a public school student who got to learn about Filipino tradition, history, culture and values in a venue other than the classroom. There was also the added thrill of meeting the cast after the performance and going to the stage to see the sets up close and personal.

A good audience

On their part, Musicat loves having public school students as an audience. “Whenever we have students from pri-

PHOTO ON THIS PAGE AND THE COVER BY OCS ALVAREZ



Scenes from *Saranggola ni Pepe*, which wowed the public school children who got to watch it for free through the Musicat Angels Program co-founded by Celeste Legaspi.

vate schools—they're so difficult," Celeste shares. "They say, 'I've seen that. It's boring. So what?' They're noisy and impatient during the first few scenes until they realize that it's actually entertaining. With public school audiences, *mangbang-mangba sila*. They're definitely better behaved, more appreciative. We find them to be a more worthwhile audience because they don't come to the theater with a cynical attitude."

The students, on the other hand, also have gained much from watching the productions. Musicat hands out evaluation sheets after the performances and have received heartwarming feedback from the kids. "*Talagang parang totoo yung palabas*," Baesa High School student Jeraldine A. Edem wrote of the production *Sino Ka Ba, Jose Rizal?* "*Naintindihan ko na ngayon kung sino talaga si Jose Rizal. At proud ako sa kanya. Saludo ako kay Dr. Jose Rizal.*"

Said Apple Joyce Jimenez, another student of the same school, "This is the first time I'd ever seen a wonder-

USE YOUR IMAGINATION

Anything's possible with a little creativity! Use these tips from the production of *Saranggola Ni Pepe* to add spice to your own school presentations and even your classroom activities.

1 Look around for inspiration Costume designer Lala Gallardo, Celeste's daughter, looked to Philippine pop culture and design. One character, for example—the Reyna—wore a gown with elements from the jeepney. Her banners were made to look like *pastillas de leche* wrappers. Another character's costume was inspired by the Pahiyas, the annual fiesta in Lucban—her colorful skirt looked like fiesta bunting!

2 Turn the everyday into the extraordinary In the story, Pepe has imaginary friends that come alive. Guess what they are? The things that he needs to make his *saranggola*! His friends include *Pisi*, *Gunting*, BBQ stick, Glue, and *Papel*. They even have a dance where they come together to form a kite.

3 Use symbols The script called for characters to fly. Not wanting to use a flying machine, the group used symbols to represent flight. They put in a trampoline and a slide on stage, and when characters used these, the audience knew that they were flying. To create different lands, the designers used props. Cloud cutouts turned the stage into "Saranggoland"—the place of Pepe's imagination. When these cutouts were rotated, the designs at the back turned the stage into "Mamaw del Norte," a scary place inhabited by monsters.

4 Give things different uses Lala also made use of origami, the Japanese art of paper folding. When two characters have a swordfight, they enter the stage with paper shields that they fold up in choreographed movements to become swords. Another character, a monster, is also made up paper and is folded up in the story like origami to symbolize its defeat.

ful musical theater like this. For me it's the best because of the way the performers play their role, the sets, costumes, lights, music, lyrics, and of course, the story. I learned a lot of things about our national hero that I didn't know before."

Good shows to watch, too

Indeed, Celeste and Musicat make sure that all the productions are excellent and truly worth watching. To date, public elementary and high school children have seen such musicals as *Katy* (about venerable Filipino singer Katy de la Cruz), *Kenkoy Loves Rosing* (from the classic Pinoy komiks series), *Larawan* (a musical based on the masterpiece of National Artist Nick Joaquin, starring Celeste herself alongside Zsa Zsa Padilla), *Sino Ka Ba, Jose Rizal?* (featuring actors like Ogie Alcasid and Mikee Cojuangco), and *Alikabok* (a moving production about the patriotism of Katipuneros).

Recently, the group staged *Saranggola Ni Pepe*, a magical experience for kids about the power of the imagination. Celeste's whole family pitched in for this show. Her husband, Nonoy Gallardo, had written the original song; their daughters Waya and

Lala were writer/director and set/costume designer, respectively.

It can't be denied that after the home and school, media is probably the strongest influencer of children's minds. It's heartening to know that media personalities like Celeste Legaspi have taken on the mission of exposing our public schools to educational entertainment that instills pride in ourselves as Filipinos. ★

Your school can take part!

The Musicat Angels Program is always on the lookout for schools they can work with to bring the power of theater to students. Musicat carefully matches the age of the audience to the level of maturity required for their latest production. To find out more about their upcoming plays or to see if your school qualifies for this program, please contact:

Organisasyon ng Pilipinong Mang-Aawit (OPM)
Suite 24PB Eisenhower Condominium
Eisenhower St. Greenhills
San Juan, Metro Manila
Tel: (02) 723-1845 or 723-1765
Fax: (02) 721-7229
Email: opm@tri-isys.com or opm@i-manila.com
Look for Cel Layag



What's it like for a Filipino to teach in another country? Meet these educators and find out!

LEANNE CUENCA, SINGAPORE

Leanne Cuenca, who has been a teacher for 16 years, is now based in Singapore, where she teaches Mathematics at the Overseas Family School. Before this, she taught at Assumption San Lorenzo and Xavier School in the Philippines, and in the University of Wollongong in Sydney, Australia.

What does it take to teach abroad?

It takes a lot of sweat and tears. "Sweat" because they really work you to the bone... I would say I had never worked this hard in all my teaching life in the Philippines! I say "tears" because I have moments when I miss my family and friends. But since I took this as an adventure, it has made me learn so many new things about myself and other cultures as well.

How is it to teach in Singapore?

The varied cultures and peoples I have

been exposed to are invaluable. The experience of living in a new place makes for a very adventurous time. The culture of the school is very professional. There are no "dramas" and red tape. My colleagues are straight to the point and do not hesitate to give their own opinions, with tactfulness.

I do miss Filipino humor. Sometimes my jokes just fall flat. Also, our relaxed attitude (to a reasonable level) and optimism in the face of our misfortunes are some of the things I think people here can learn from Filipinos.

What are the students, parents and teachers like in your school?

Although the students are more opinionated, the atmosphere of respect for teachers and administration is prevalent. And the discipline is very good at my school.

In terms of my subject, Math, I find teaching the students a little more challenging than teaching the students back home. At the same time, however, I

feel the students here have a better level of maturity with their studies.

Parents are very involved with the education of their children and have a good relationship with the school. Many of my co-teachers are friendly and we get along socially.

What have you learned from teaching in other countries?

I learned a lot about other cultures first hand. I've also learned that I appreciate a good level of professionalism where differing opinions on school issues are not taken personally. There is a respect for people who express their opinions and no judgments are made about their person.

Are there things you were able to contribute to your school from your experiences in the Philippines?

Most of my experience in teaching has been in Manila. I am so proud of the world-class level of Mathematics we are teaching in the schools where I worked in Manila. I feel that my teaching in the Philippines has greatly helped me perform well here. Also, being one of the very few Filipinos in the school, I have taken it upon myself to be an ambassador of Filipino culture. Being away from my country has made me more proud of my culture than I have ever been. So much so that I make it a point to share things about our people and our country every opportunity I have, whether it be in simple daily conversations with people, or in presenting Filipino cultural dances to the whole school in concerts.

If you could come back here and teach again, are there things you would do differently?

Well, I would really push for a more professional atmosphere in school among teachers and administrators, where there is less *sama ng loob* and more respect for differing opinions. I would also like to get into a gifted education program which I feel is sorely lacking in our school systems. Further, I think Filipino schools should really put a strong emphasis on educating the students more on Filipino traditions and culture.

ANCHELLA LAGUMBAY-RENGERS, CALIFORNIA, USA

Anchella Lagumbay Rengers lives and teaches in Gilroy, California. Her family migrated to the US when she was in high school, and she finished her studies there. She met her husband, David Rengers, in college. She began her teaching career as a substitute teacher at Rucker Elementary School in 1997 and moved to Antonio Del Buono Elementary School in 2001, where she now teaches second grade.

How is it to teach in Gilroy, CA?

I would think the main difference in teaching here in the US, especially in CA, is diversity. A typical class in the city might have students with as many as 10 different languages (e.g. Vietnamese, Chinese, Punjabi, Spanish, Tagalog, Korean, Japanese, Italian).

lum as the rest though they don't speak English. I have to be creative in my methods, so they can understand me despite the language barrier.

What are some of the problems you've had to face?

There are many family issues that we have to deal with. Some students might come to school without having eaten anything for breakfast. (We do have free or reduced-cost breakfast and lunch available in the cafeteria if the students qualify based on family income). Some smell of cigarette smoke, even their school supplies do, too. Some might have slept at a place other than their homes because they don't have permanent homes. I would think, though, that some students in the public schools in the Philippines face similar issues.

What's your relationship like with the parents of your students?

You can probably gather that some parents have their issues and pass along their own baggage to their children, thus they make school uninteresting to these little guys. The students are thinking more of their home lives—their worlds that are falling apart because of divorce, abuse, poverty...

Not all parents are that way, however. I have been blessed with awesome, involved, supportive parents. They volunteer in the classroom. Some come in and read to my borderline students who can make it to the average end (as opposed to low average) simply with a little bit more attention. Still others come in to do art and cooking with my class. We have luncheons every month for well-behaved, "finished all

I've learned from meeting other Filipinos working in Singapore that we as a people are truly resilient and very hard working. Filipinos generally excel in what they do, and adjust very well to a culture that is different from theirs. Sometimes I wonder why Filipinos can be very disciplined outside of the country, but are not the same back home. —Leanne Cuenca



From left: Leanne Cuenca, Anchella Lagumbay-Rengers, and Anchella in a group faculty photo (where she's in the second row, second from right)

Here in Gilroy, we have students who are children of migrant workers from Mexico. They move from place to place depending on work availability. So sometimes we see them in the beginning of the year, but by November, they leave and won't return till towards May, creating many gaps in their education. I have to communicate to the parents who mostly speak Spanish. Also, I have to make sure that the kids are exposed to the same curricu-

What are your co-teachers like?

I have been blessed with wonderful co-workers. Teachers who have taught for at least 30 years have mentored me. Their main motivation has always been what's good for the students. In our staff meetings, we leave an empty chair in front of the room to remind us of student X who will be affected by our every decision/action.

my homework" students, and parents bring in treats (as in a whole spread) for all of us.

What do you think of your students?

The students are great! I allow them to do goofy things that are still learning experiences. For Halloween, I brought in four large pumpkins per group of five kids... I asked them to estimate the weight, circumference of it (with a



string), predict how many seeds are inside, etc. We opened the top and asked them to remove the seeds and count them to see if their predictions were close. They were complaining because of gooey, sticky, slimy, things in there, but they were having a blast! From there I got tons of vocabulary words, descriptive words that I wouldn't have been able to generate from them by just asking.

Some students, though, are totally uninterested and apathetic. Some have behavioral issues. One of my former students was on medication for manic-depression (yes, at age 8, 3rd grade)—really bad home life. I have had gifted and talented students who just blow me away with the kinds of reasoning they have at an early age (they have very supportive parents—what a surprise).

Are there things you were able to contribute to your school from your experiences in the Philippines?

I get to tell my students about my own culture. I show them the traditional costumes we have, bring Filipino food, and teach a few of our folkdances. Our



Teaching is a work of heart. You've got to love what you're doing to be able to be successful at it. The look of wonder in a child's eyes, the bond you form for those 10 months, the sense of fulfillment you get at the end of the day no matter how challenging your day gets... those things are priceless.

—Anchella Lagumbay Rengers

former principal taught PE for a number of years and bought PVC pipes to use as poles for *Timikling*. She came and taught my students last year how to dance it.

FRANCISCA WAGAN-FESALBON, MACAU

Francisca is based in Macau with her husband and three kids. She's on her 14th year of teaching in this Chinese special administrative region that used to be a Portugese colony. She teaches English at Yuet Wah College and English, geography, economics, moral education, history, and PE at Santa

Rosa de Lima English School. Before this, she taught for three years in the Philippines.

What made you decide to move and teach abroad?

I had to, because I had to support my younger brothers in their studies.

How is it to teach in Macau?

The salary is higher, but there's a lot of pressure and workload is heavier. In terms of the money, I would say that "if the button in your shirt is big, definitely the hole is big, too."

Some students are very hardworking and obedient but of

course there are quite a few who are naughty.

The teachers are supportive and helpful. With parents, there is a language barrier so I can only talk to them if there is a "parent- teacher encounter" with a translator, so I don't have much contact with them. It's only if there is a problem with students that their parents will be called. Most parents are cooperative and many of them respect their children's teachers.

Do you work with other Filipino teachers?

Yes, there are about 11 or 12 Filipino teachers, an Indian, a Korean, a Japanese, and the rest are all Chinese.

Are there things you were able to contribute to your school from your teaching experience in the Philippines?

Patience and understanding. We Filipinos are known for our patience when it comes to educating. That for me is a virtue that I have imparted to my students and colleagues.

Is there anything you miss about teaching in the Philippines?

My Filipino students because they are more polite and courteous. And of course, I miss my colleagues!

Do you think you'll ever come back home to teach?

Yes, of course. Teaching is my life and as long as I can teach, I will. ★

DO YOU HAVE TEACHING STORIES TO SHARE? WRITE TO US!

We're looking for stories of teachers who are doing extraordinary things in the classroom, the community or in their homes, or those who have solved a problem or improved their school with new and creative ideas. You just might be our next feature!

Send your letters to: *Star Teacher* Sa Aklat Sisikat Foundation 35/F Petron Mega Plaza Senator Gil Puyat Avenue, Makati City

Fax: 889-8135 Cell: 0927-9133712 Email: teachers@readerstransform.com

Please include your contact details.