

Manila: Sin City?

And Other Chronicles



Quijano de Manila

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A GRYK  ORTALEZA
BOOK PRODUCTION

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Convention '61: The Climate of Politics

June 1961

APOCRYPHAL, maybe, but indicative is the story about the young Manileño who threw a bachelor's party last week before getting married, but couldn't get any stag movies. All local stocks of those films, he was told, had been commandeered for the delectation of the delegates to the Nacionalista Party convention.

From the swinging towns of Olongapo, Zambales, and Angeles, Pampanga, comes a more factual report: that the night clubs in those towns were mostly shuttered up last week, because all their girls had been transported to Manila to entertain the NP delegates.

Some 2,000 of those delegates, from all over the country, came to Manila by bus, boat, train and plane, and the NPs expected the city to be overwhelmed by what one NP drum-beater, J.V. Cruz, described as "something that has never happened here on this scale before" — but Manila is a big city and a couple of thousand more visitors make hardly a drop in its bucket. The conventionists were simply swallowed up; one was aware of them only as noisy groups in the lobbies of seafront hotels or as a gaudy hat and badge sticking out in an indifferent downtown crowd. If the NPs thought to make this rebel city of Manila convention conscious, they failed.

Besides, the city's mayor had forbidden political propaganda on its streets. There were a few giant billboards

advertising the virtues of this or that veep aspirant but no jungle of posters and streamers like that which proliferated in the suburbs, especially in Quezon City.

The delegates were met at pier, airport, train station, bus depot and hotel lobby by bevvies of girls in uniform costumes and by the would-be candidates themselves, who did not disdain to act as porters for the more exalted members of the delegations. One veep aspirant drove all the way to Calamba to meet the Bicol Express so he could beat his rivals to greeting the delegation it carried.

The delegates were lodged at the city's top hotels, at no expense to themselves, but there were so many of them the Bayview had to cram them ten to a room and the Manila Hotel had to turn its Petal Room into a dormitory. Happy days were here again for a delirious week, not only for the visitors from the provinces, who lived like lords on nothing more than their badges, but also for the hotels, the fancy restaurants, the night clubs, and certain places of special entertainment.

On Thursday afternoon, veep aspirant Quintin Paredes invited the delegates to a lauriat at his home in Quezon City. The party started at five in the afternoon, being supposed to be a merienda cena, but was still going on at two in the morning. The tables looked as if they could provision an army, but toward midnight the food ran out and an emergency order had to be rushed to a restaurant caterer.

On Friday night, the big feed was at the Manila Hotel's long-unused Fiesta Pavilion, and the after-dinner speeches were provided by no less than President Garcia and the eight men who hoped to be his running mate. When the President spoke of "the campaign of vilification" against him and his administration, amused listeners recalled that the phrase was a favorite one of President Quirino's during the last unhappy days of the Liberal dispensation. The more the political scene changes, the more it remains the same.

From the Manila Hotel, in a pouring rain, the delegates

drove to the Bayside Club, which had been reserved for them that night. Waiting at the club were some 300 girls, all dressed to the teeth: piled-up coiffures, fancy jewelry, pouf skirts. The orchestra discreetly limited itself to the kind of dance music the elderly provincianos might be expected to dig: waltzes and the paso-doble. The stamp-size dance floor was so crowded all the dancers could do was lean against each other. Anyway, most of the delegates preferred to sit it out at the tables, wiping away with their palms the delicate dew that formed on the bare backs of the girls. The air conditioning had been defeated by the dense crowd. A commercial photographer wandering around the tables taking pictures inspired no fear. So dim were the lights and so thick the haze of smoke any picture snapped there that night would have looked like dinuguan.

That was a long, long and very late night — which explains why the next morning, Saturday, the first day of the convention, the Araneta Coliseum was still half-empty at half-past nine though the delegates had been bidden, during the Manila Hotel dinner the night before, to be at their places by half-past eight. Dressed up in the barong Tagalog, they started arriving at ten.

The roads to the coliseum presented curious sights: buses full of glamorous ladies one never sees on buses, wearing identical kimonas; troops of cyclists waving pennants; a band of Igorots in G-strings; and a procession of about a hundred calesas bearing the partidarios of Secretary Alejo Santos, "the poor man's candidate."

Into the coliseum poured an estimated 21,000 people, but they couldn't fill it up: the upper boxes were mostly empty. The stage had a pall of black cloth above it and a wilderness of microphones and TV cameras in front. Whoever was speaking was invisible behind all that paraphernalia.

When Senator Puyat entered the arena, there was a dramatic shower of toy balloons from the ceiling. The other

veep aspirants contented themselves with the time-honored ritual of being borne in on the shoulders of their more muscular supporters.

The convention finally started at 20 minutes past ten. Two bands played the national anthem but not simultaneously. One was still halfway through the hymn when the other had finished. Theirs was a fitting prelude to confusion.

After the invocation came the roll call and the speeches and utter boredom. Ambassador Romulo droned on and on, interminably, but only Senator Pacita Gonzales seemed to be listening, seated to one side of the speaker's rostrum, within range of the TV cameras. The senadora was in fine form all that day, tripping back and forth across the stage, between speeches, like the prima ballerina in a particularly cacophonous ballet. Her corps de ballet were all in kimona and patadiong: pretty young girls whose presence on the stage bespoke agility and enterprise, for the Quezon City police had formed a cordon around the stage and forbade even newsmen to approach it.

That Saturday, incidentally, was the day of the kimona. The female provincial delegates came in morning ternos, the provincianas being closer to tradition; but the city women were mostly in kimonas, the day being long past when that item of feminine wear was supposed to be worn only within the intimacy of the home and never, never in the presence of company much less when one goes out. But ours is an informal age and the Filipino woman can now face 21,000 strangers in a kimona, though her mother would have thought that equivalent to appearing in public in her chemise.

Rah-Rah Girls

The congressional ladies were in transparent kimonas of a silken color. Also transparent but of different colors were

the kimonas of the rah-rah girls of the various veep aspirants. The Puyat feminine cheering squads wore knee-length patadiongs and Cuban-style bandannas topped with a medallion-like picture of the gentleman from Pampanga. One expected them any moment to go into the conga or to sing the Peanut Vendor's Song. Some ladies in kimonas did actually plunge into a dance, some sort of folk dance, but the audience didn't encourage them.

The girls provided color and spectacle but they couldn't save the show.

Things perked up a bit when the President showed up, accompanied to the doors of the coliseum by what looked like a major portion of the armed forces, complete with machine guns. It was long past noon, and Mr. Garcia mercifully abbreviated his acceptance speech to 15 minutes of gratitude for "your faith in my leadership." He wasn't speaking to 21,000 people by then; the arena and the lower boxes were still crowded but the bleachers had emptied. The noisy folk who had filled them since eight in the morning had repaired to the nearby headquarters of their respective recruiters, and there one found them standing in line to be paid two pesos for their services. They were mostly teen-agers, boys recruited from slum areas, given propaganda T-shirts, transported to the coliseum and promised two pesos to shout one name.

The lunch boxes distributed during the noon break contained very dry, very cold slices of ham, chicken and bread, and smelled as if they had been prepared weeks in advance.

The rest of the afternoon was devoted to the nominations, and it was all one could do to stay awake, despite the pandemonium. The big show went on and on, but TV viewers had long switched it off. It was a relief to step out of the coliseum and discover that, only a street away, people were blissfully unaware of or indifferent to what was going on in there. They walked past with hardly a glance toward the big dome or at the mammoth streamers that ringed the

fields around it; waitresses at the Cubao restaurants asked who was playing that afternoon at the coliseum.

That night, after the delegates had finally given up and returned to their hotels, children and poor folk crawled across the dark fields and began tearing off large strips of the streamers. Washed of their political print, the cloth would make good underwear.

The session on Sunday began at eleven in the morning, broke off at almost midnight, with nothing still settled, except the first balloting. The fine clothes of opening day had been shed; everybody was in working clothes. The veep aspirants wore gaudy polo shirts; the rah-rah girls had changed to skippers, brief skirts or shorts, and collegiate skull caps.

The cheering was better organized. A leader on the floor would wave his arms and people up in the bleachers would unfurl a streamer, screaming all the while; another wave of the arms and up would pop cut-out letters that spelled a name. Such a palabas would instantly be answered by rival groups with similar displays of streamers or with showers of boxes containing combs, soap and cigarettes.

Puyat's entrance on Sunday was marked, not by a shower of balloons, but by a flight of beribboned doves.

Some sort of climax was reached at around half-past three in the afternoon when four of the veep aspirants the tail-enders — met in the center of the arena, went into a huddle, and then began kissing each other, while the crowd roared.

So great was the noise and the turmoil during the balloting that even so vivid a personality as Mayor Lacson managed to come and go without being noticed.

By the time darkness had set in, the cheering had lost its gaiety, was turning savage, and the battle of the streamers had to be ordered stopped. The would-be candidates looked sick as they wandered slowly around and around the arena; the delegates were plainly in a state of stupor; and the cap-

tive audience of radio men, newsmen and policemen wondered how much longer they would have to endure a show they had grown tired of.

The convention had turned into an orgy of waste. One saw money streaming away in the form of streamers, posters, handbills, T-shirts, tabloid "extras," cigarettes and cigarette lighters. At lunchtime, torrents of food boxes flooded the arena and people grabbed two, three, four boxes. But afterwards one saw boxes, their contents hardly touched, thrown away. One saw food in the trashcans, food on the floor, and people sitting around, looking gluttonous. To complete the picture of the orgy, there were the scantily clad girls wandering all over the place, snapping at each other, fawning over the men, screaming with the crowd. When the women were asking for suffrage, a prime argument was that they would bring decency and decorum to the political scene. To the late NP convention, the girls brought, not decorum (their screams were even shriller than the men's), but a touch of luxury, an air of bacchanalia.

Expense Of Spirit

The usual argument is that the alternative to this tumult, this vulgarity, this extravagance, is the absolute discipline of Fascism or Communism; but how long can fear of the police state prevail against disgust over the methods of politicians? And those methods are becoming so expensive the party system of democracy may price itself right out of the local market. How much was the total cost of the big show at the coliseum and how many more such shows can we afford? The delegates are said to have cost much more in this convention than in the last one and will presumably cost even more in the next. The time may come, it has been observed, when only plutocrats — or the creatures of plutocrats — can afford to run for high office. And from plutocracy it may be only a step to absolutism. The riotousness

of our political conventions may not be as innocent as we like to say it is.

Came the dawn and the morning after, Monday, which is when all good orgies end and the revelers return to reality — but still the NP orgy dragged on, though to many it had turned into a wake. That pall of black cloth over the platform now expressed the mourning of all the hapless tail-enders who were withdrawing from the scrimmage one after another. An entire group, in fact — the Paredes bloc—burst into tears and wild wailing when the grand old man from Abra announced that he, too, was retiring from the race.

Mr. Puyat's entrance this time was conventional: his supporters merely bore him up on their shoulders and dumped him on the platform. Nobody had complained about the balloons and the beribboned doves, but a lot of sound and fury was provoked by this dumping of the senator on the platform. It was not, said the managers of the show, part of the program.

The show went on, but it was now playing to an empty house. The delegates had all that immense coliseum to themselves, and their voices didn't sound so loud any more. Gone were the streamers, the balloons, the souvenirs. Empty were the boxes and the bleachers. Vanished were the rah-rah girls and the glamorous ladies. And the coliseum looked as filthy as the Luneta after a parade.

But, stripped of its circus trappings, the show at last turned serious and achieved, on Monday afternoon, a moment of dignity. The sated, jaded delegates were ready to throw in the towel, to surrender their responsibilities and let other people, the big shots of the party, decide what they had failed to decide. All they wanted to do now was go home.

Then Secretary Aytona made his "appeal to the conscience".

"If I am undeserving of your vote then vote against me—but vote! Let the decision come from you, the dele-

gates, and not from anybody else.”

At that moment, all those exhausted provincianos didn't look capable at all of rising to the challenge, to any challenge—but they did rise to it.

“Come on, let's vote!” rose the chorus—and that, perhaps, was the one moment of magnificence in the whole vulgar show.

Dragging themselves up from their chairs, the delegates filed across the arena for the second balloting.

The Night the Mountain Came Down
