

All that glitters...

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Filipino play offers new twist on folk tale of magical bird

By: Jesse Brogan Special to FP Community Review Posted:
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In the upcoming production of *The Glitter Bird*, award-winning playwright Primrose Madayag Knazan and U’N I Together Productions artistic director Hazel Venzon have modernized an old Filipino folk tale into a music-filled theatrical parody which aims to keep cultural stories alive while also giving them new life.

Looking to tell a Filipino folk tale, Venzon initially brought the story of *The Adarna Bird* to Knazan. An epic poem from the 19th-century, it tells the story of a magical bird can heal through song and reveal truth. Knazan modernized it, turning it into *The Glitter Bird*, a story about a Filipino family learning about kindness, self-worth, and courage.

“As I was reading this (poem), the first thing I thought was ‘I’m going to turn this into a play.’ The bird is clearly a drag queen and she’s going to poop glitter,” Knazan said.



Knazan said she thinks *The Glitter Bird* — presented as part of U’N I Together’s Pamasko Tales series at the Philippine Canadian Centre of Manitoba (737 Keewatin St.) – will be relatable to both young and old, but the story does focus on children. With dancing, music, a drag queen and glitter, Knazan plays with the idea of children trying to live up to the expectations of their parents and she believes there will be a lot of nostalgia for parents and excitement for the younger generation.

“I’m basing this story on my own upbringing,” Knazan said. “(Immigrant parents) load a lot of expectations on their children because they came to Canada for a better life. Not a better life for themselves, but for their children.”

Knazan also added that the play is not just for Filipinos — it is for everyone.

After writing a novel, *Lessons in Fusion*, inspired by the experiences of her eldest son, Jericho, Knazan was excited to write something for her youngest son, Silas, who is 13. Once she discovered the story is about family, acceptance, and unconditional love “everything clicked,” and she knew exactly where to take the story.

The production of the show has been “so hand in glove,” Venzon said. A full range of actors from different generations has added to the playfulness of the show, she said.

“Everyone is coming from their own little pocket of life and inside this play there is a harmony, there’s a gel, there’s a real ease going inside this world,” Venzon said. “It has been so much fun to help them (the cast) pull out the characters so they can feel even more sense of play.”

Matthew Pagtalunan, who plays the titular Glitter Bird, pulls from his experience performing in drag as Nila Ganda. Both Knazan and Venzon thought Pagtalunan would be perfect, owing to the campy nature of the role.

When preparing, Pagtalunan thought about the kind of energy he wanted to bring to the role as “a bit of an antagonist, a somewhat villainous queen.”



Photo by Jesse Brogan

Playwright Primrose Madayag Knazan adapted *The Glitter Bird* from the 19th-century Filipino epic poem *The Adarna Bird*.

“My first thought was someone theatrical and larger than life, and Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* initially came to mind,” Pagtalunan said. “It all kind of naturally brought together this villainous, larger-than-life, extra-fabulous kind of character within me.”

Knazan added universal themes to the story to make it more than a kids’ holiday show.

“It’s layered,” said Knazan. “I think adults will just have such a blast watching this play. I really do. I think Filipinos will have a blast on another level separately.”

The Glitter Bird will be performed at the Philippine Canadian Centre of Manitoba on Dec. 22, 23, 26, 29, and 30, with each show starting at 2 p.m. Tickets can be purchased online at unitogether.ca/pamaskotales