

## Celebrating Diversity Through the Arts

Jose Rizal's famous novel *NOLI ME TANGERE* (Touch Me Not), was written in 1887, yet resonates with the "social cancer" it hoped to quell in many present day countries. "NOLI" as the novel is popularly called, is one of two books written by the Philippine National Hero, Jose Rizal, a renaissance man, writer, poet and physician, who was inspired by Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Worlds apart, both dedicated their lives to fighting for freedom and equality through the might of their pen. Stowe was canonized to sainthood and became the voice of the marginalized in the West while Rizal was raised to the people's consciousness in the East igniting a people's movement. The lessons learned from both novels is to find a common ground in which it can empower an individual to affect positive change in the world. Thus, the inspiration of Uncle Tom's Cabin combined with the compelling story of Noli Me Tangere, moves us all to rediscover our complicated past and reconnect that period of our shared history that still resonates in the present day.

The Opera was composed by Philippine National Artist, Felipe de Leon. It recounts the struggles of Juan Crisostomo Ibarra y Magsalin who returns to the Philippines after seven years of academic studies in Europe. He plans to wed this betrothed and fulfill his father's dream of opening a school to pave the way for his country's progress through education. In all things, he is thwarted by the notorious and influential Padre Damaso, creating a dramatic storyline of unrequited *love, betrayal and revenge* - that great operas are made of. The opera premiered in the Philippines in 1957 and was re-staged in 1987 with the Philippine Philharmonic Orchestra to commemorate the centennial of the publication of the novel by the Cultural Center of the Philippines. The Chicago premiere in 2012 was the first outside the Philippines.

This modern day opera is a first of its kind to introduce Tagalog as a lyric language, this brings to stage a new expression of the vocal arts, with the unification of Western classical traditions, and the emergence of a modern Filipino opera, with soaring arias and accompanied by beautiful, melodious music, capturing the entire plot laden with many new twists and turns, including a mad scene and a first in opera – a crocodile attack!

It was created by a classical composer from Asia, borne out from an inspired novel, and galvanized by a people's movement that changed the world. More importantly, it all started from the brilliant mind of an American woman novelist who was the reason behind America's greatest crowning achievement that moved our dear Abraham Lincoln to write the Emancipation Act to free the slaves. More than a century since it was presented, it finally reached America, coming home full circle.