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Willi Red Buhay Interview

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Interviewer: Lauren Todd
Artist: Willi Red Buhay
In-person Interview: Lakeview, Chicago IL.
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Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during the 2011 Spring quarter as part of the Asian American Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media & Design.

Bio: Willi Red Buhay was a graduate of San Beda College and the University of Sto. Tomas. He was the first artistic director for design of the Cultural Center of the Philippines and the Folk Arts Theater, a position he held for fifteen years. He also held a teaching post at the University of the Philippines and his alma mater.

One of Manila’s celebrated design-artist-painters, Willi had staged over 300 productions from theater and cinema to gallery exhibitions. In 1970, he won the prestigious design competition for the Philippine Center in New York. It was the start of numerous design commissions from hotels, resorts and museums. His artworks are in private collections and institutions in Asia, Europe, North America, and the Vatican.

He received the Governor’s Award for Arts from Jim Edgar in 1993, the Most Outstanding Artist Overseas for Arts and Humanities and from the Philippine Government in 2004. He was also recognized by the city of Chicago for distinction and contribution to the Filipino-American community. He is the artist-in-residence of the Filipino American Community in Chicago. Concurrently, he holds the directorial post for arts and religious programs at the FACC-Rizal Center.

A fifth-generation in a family of artists, cultural leaders, and patriots, he currently lives and works in his Lakeshore home-studio.

Mr. Buhay and I spoke casually before the interview officially began. The first prompt is a reference to a part of the pre-interview conversation relevant to his career.

Lauren Todd: So, you were saying you worked for the National Theater?

Willi Red Buhay: Yes. I was appointed artistic director. I was the first director for the Cultural Center of the Philippines, which was the national theater and one of the offices that I held for 15 years. The first was the Folk Arts Theater. So, the Folk Arts Theater preserves documents and
disseminates folk art forms. Not just the visual, not just the performing, but also the literal, like literature, things like that. But I was more into the visual, so I would take care of stage designs for ballet, for opera, for any indigenous folk festivities that were supposed to be mounted at the National Theater. If it would be too grandiose a theater for folk presentation, we’d go to the Folk Arts Theater, which is less ornate and less frivolous and not with red carpets. They were all paved with removable seats, which would seat 10,000 people at a time. It’s the largest theater in Asia, the Folk Arts Theater. I loved the Folk Arts Theater, because you deal with simple people! If you go to the Cultural Center, these are the "high fatomic" type.

I held onto that with the assignments like the Papal visit, Jean Paul II. I met him personally; I was blessed personally by the Pope. I was given a relic, and memorabilia of his visit. That’s one. But other affairs of the First Family, like the weddings, the birthdays, anything that they feel like having, then the whole thing would be dumped into my desk for me to design!

LT: So you were the Grand Event Planner for the Royal Family. How did you get that appointment? What was your education up until then?

WRB: Oh yes. I took Fine Arts. I majored in interior design at the University of Santo Tomas, which is the oldest university in Asia, even older than Harvard. It’s an Ivy League university and its the pontifical university in the whole of Asia. That means it was founded by the Pope. So basically, it’s very Catholic, like the Catholic schools you have here. So there’s a lot of do’s and don’ts.

So anyway, I had been competing with my fellow classmates, and I’d been winning awards. So one competition was launched by the First Philippine Institute of Interior Design, which was to design the Philippine Center in New York. It’s like the Philippine Embassy in New York. But, there’s a theater and restaurant... and, I won. I was 3rd year college.

LT: And that was implemented?

WFB: Yes. But not all of them, because there is union in the United States, especially New York that local artists need to be given first preference and they just inject your ideas of local designs. Which, I took it very easily because I was so young. I was real young, I was 19 years old.

So, after that award, it was the first time I met our First Lady, and of course the usual thing: you get congratulated, you get an award, and that’s it, you’re forgotten. And who am I to be remembered? I was a student. But I won! My designs, I could see implemented in one way or the other. And that was 1969-70.

In 1974, during the time I was past my college years, so I was teaching. And at the same time, in a design studio. I taught first at a state university, the University of the Philippines, and not my alma mater. So from 71-73, I was teaching at the state university. Erector Magnificus, the highest official of my alma mater, saw me one time at a party. So he said “Oh, you’re teaching now at UP.” Yes. “Why don’t you teach at your alma mater?” Well I said, “I never got an invitation to teach.” “Well! Next semester, you teach. You tell the dean that I want you to teach.”

LT: Was it hard to switch from one to the other?
WRB: Yes. I had to give up the University of the Philippines, because that was the beginning of the martial law. The shuttle from north to south was so difficult, the Manila flood, and all of that. When we have floods, its not one foot or two feet, it’s up to the waist. The old Manila was designed like Florence, like Venice, where you have canals and all of that. When the Americans came, they were afraid of mosquitoes, so they covered it and had everything underground. So we have avenues, and boulevards. Even Daniel Burnham with President McKinley, your president here, commissioned him to go to the Philippines to experiment on designing the boulevard, which is like this same thing with Lake Shore Drive. So our Rojas Boulevard is a twin of Lake Shore Drive. So in other parts, here in Chicago, a replica or prototype is existing in the Philippines!

So from 350 years of Spain, we had 50 years of the United States. Everything was Hollywood. Lifestyle was changed, too, everything. So you can just see how ambivalent the Filipino is in spirit.

LT: Was it sort of a forceful cultural change or were people happy about it?

WRB: Well, there was that extreme desire for an identity of the Filipinos during the Spanish-Filipino War. But when the United States came, there was education. It was the first thing that they brought to the islands. But my interest really was into the preservation of the Philippine art form. And so I had the reign for 15 years to go around researching, documenting, and then bringing the raw materials to the Folk Arts Theater. The Cultural Center will be the big productions, the coming from abroad: from Europe, from the States. So what you see here in the big theaters, like the Lyric Opera, all of that, we have that at the Cultural Center.

I was working with people at the height of their careers. And I was young, I was less than thirty. I enjoyed it, because I was the only one doing it. Nobody would question me, nobody would ask me how I got the assignment because everything comes from the First Lady. I really enjoyed my designing. So in total I did more than 300 productions over 15 years.

LT: You had such a successful career in Manila. What made you leave; why did you come to Chicago?

WRB: It was the revolution of 1986, which we call the People Power. And since I’ve been with the government and I served the First Family, the artists, or people who were non-artist that were very close, lost all their jobs, including the president of the Cultural Center, who was a very fine artist and pianist. She became a national artist. Most of the artists I worked with at the National Theater are now national artists, because they were revered after the hero of the Marcos’. But I left, because I have my two sisters with their families, my two brothers with their families, and my mother. And I took care of them. Rather well. We do have a very comfortable life in Manila, I would rather even say privileged. And we live through our arts. My great grandfather was the famed sculptor. He would carve the portraits in marble, in wood, of the King and Queen of Spain during the late 1800’s. And both my father and mother are kins of the national hero.

LT: Jose Rizal?

WRB: Yes. My father comes from the mother’s side of Jose Rizal, and my mother comes from the father’s side. So it’s both in the lineage.
LT: He was a very multitalented man, too. Is that what inspired you at first?

WRB: Well, I would say most of my siblings too have the gift of being multitalented. Some excel in the visual arts, two are in the visual arts, like my younger sister who graduated as an interior designer, but we both ended up as painters. I do write; I’ve written several books. I’ve a sister who’s a writer, too, but she ended up being a house goddess, you know, a housewife. But she writes. The same thing with my other brothers. My mom is a professional psychologist and a painter, and a culinary... she was a very avant garde, like what we see now in quantum kitchen? Oh god, she was there, teaching experimental cookery for 35 years at the first girls’ university in the Philippines.

My father was a businessman, and he didn’t mind our being into the arts, except for me. Since I was eldest, he hated seeing me tinkering with painting. He wanted me to go to agriculture and take care of the family business. And so the problem is, I grew up with fine arts at home. Oh goodness, the works of our Philippine masters were there. The family lifestyle is sometimes even odd; it’s not in time with the year. It was too conservative, and too strict. My goodness, my father was very very strict - from the table to the way you move and the way you carry yourself in public, everything has to be regimented. We all grew up that, to a point. My younger brothers had been skipping alot, during dinners they wouldn’t want to be around with a very strict process of eating. That’s why we enjoy picnics and enjoy barbecues.

LT: Maybe that’s why you chose Chicago over another city.

WRB: I actually had my uncle here. When we were asked to resign, so we had to give up our post because there was a new president and a new set up of rules and program for the theater. Of course from the president down to the last staff had to give up their post. I was taken back by the new president to work as assistant to her post as president of the Cultural Center. Oh god, I was so uncomfortable because my other friends who are other directors had families and had no job! I couldn’t fathom. I’m comfortable, in a way, but my friends who work with me for the longest time were going on a picket.

What happened is, I reported twice to the new administration, the new management, and I said “give me time. I can’t report the whole week.” Because there was no salary yet. There was no structure in the theater. Anyway, my mom was here earlier, because of my grandmother. And so we had been applied for immigration. The revolution in the Philippines on February 26th, and two days after the embassy were calling us to come to the United States. I wasn’t prepared! I was not prepared at all. So, the last three days before our immigration call would expire, we finally decided to come. I took my two brothers and my mom (she was visiting Manila and got caught in the revolution) and myself, so we were four. Luckily there was some agency who had just four empty seats, just before the immigration call expired. We made it here. November 4, here in Chicago. And so we move to Cleveland, because my grandmother lives in Cleveland, and my uncle here in Chicago. So I said, “Oh what can I do?” Well, relax for one weekend then look for a job. That was November 4 - it was snowing, and last day of November there was a blizzard.

After that, I move to Chicago. I was looking for a job, and I never had the experience of finishing a portfolio or doing a resume, because even before graduation from college, I had the job. And I
had been in the right place at the right time. So I made one, very crudely, and searched for a job. When I got my green card, I returned to the Philippines, without letting my mother know. I was at the airport, I said. I’ll see you in a few months. “Where are you?” I’m in O’Hare. “What are you doing in O’Hare?” I’m going to the Philippines. “What?”

**LT:** Did you go back to get paperwork for your portfolio?

**WRB:** That’s what I did. I went to finish my portfolio and everything that’s needed for presentation for a job. 25 years ago, it was so different the way you applied for jobs. No design company would accept me. They said, “You should start your own.” I said, “why would I start my own? I have no local experience.” “Then go to the theater.” The theater, I realized, won’t get local designers. Their designers are all Europeans. Costumes made in Italy, all of that. Because it has to be the best of the best for the audience. The local designers are not needed.

But, after the revolution, many artists were hired by the Cultural Center - 2000 without pay. Because that was the premise of the new president, that those who signed the manifesto supporting her would land a job. So they landed a job, but there was no pay. So I said, that’s not a job, that’s just an appointment, so what do you do if you have families, if you have kids at school? What do you do? That was really the decline of Philippine artists and arts in the Philippines of that period, from 1966 to 1990. But I think we recovered somewhat well. I could see artists blooming around again in the Philippines.

Here, I worked with Marshall Fields. First job, and only job that I have gotten myself as far as art. I entered there as a part time designer. Most of the time I would do designing for the Walnut Room Christmas Tree. I did not show my portfolio, I did not show my bio data or resume. I just applied with a paper that I wanted to be a part-time designer.

So I saw that I was with girls, all of them, except for one Filipino who applied, who wanted the same position. They needed 10 artists to work on the Christmas tree. Just to work on the ornaments, they’re all hand made ornaments. They would get them and sell them after 5 years. The tree is the tallest indoor tree in the whole United States, that one in the Walnut Room. And it’s decorated every year and there are 5,555 handmade ornaments of three sizes. I would do the design. I would also create the prototype and present it to the vice president of design, Howard Sharp, who was the big man of Marshall Fields. If he likes it, he would say make a dozen of each sizes. They’re made of all sorts, from paper to wood to foam, to cotton, things like that. And I’d been doing that for 4 years, just the Christmas tree.

One assignment, which was the Belle France, the 200 years of the French Revolution. So my manager, my work was so different from the rest, so she reported, she said, “I think you have to see the work of Willi.” Since I was separated from the rest of the design pool at Marshall Fields, nobody could see me. I had a small little cubicle. I would work on my designs there. Nobody could definitely go inside there except the vice president and my manager. The other designers can’t even get to peep, because I was doing designs in advance for the windows, for the interiors, and basically for special events. But the big big project of Marshall Fields was the Belle France, because it had to do with the French government, things like that. So the vice president, he said, “let him report tomorrow at 7am.” We start at 8 but I have to be there at 7. I said, “oh god, what is
this?” My manager said, “bring your portfolio. do you have a portfolio?” I said yes. “Why didn’t you show it to me?” He didn’t ask for it! “What about your resume, bio data?” Well, I have something prepared but I never presented because it wasn’t needed for the work. So she said, “bring it, too.”

So she saw my portfolio, she said, “you’re not supposed to work with us!” Oh my god, I’m losing my job. This is the only job, it’s winter time. This is going to be something. So I went 7 in the morning to the vice president - very nice old man. He was the dean of design of Chicago. From the Art Institute to Columbia and all these art schools here, when you say Homer Sharp, they stand. He’s that respected, as a designer. And since he was there doing as vice president for design, for the whole store, he was there. Later, we would have projects at the Art Institute, and all these parties and all of that. I enjoyed it!

Anyway, so he said, “Willi, Sally said that you have a very impressive portfolio.” “I don’t know if it’s impressive, but it’s my history,” I said. “Can you bring it over?” I said, “I have it in the studio. But will you promise me one thing? After seeing it, will I lose my job? I made a compromise.” “I don’t know how to answer,” he said. Because this is my lifeline, I said, “if I lose my job, no one is going to hire me.” “I promise you, if I see your portfolio, then you will be in a different studio.” Oh, I don’t want to go to other studio, I want to stay here.

So that was my 6th month at Marshall Fields. So he said, “my goodness. It’s either you should be teaching, or you should have your own studio.” That’s what the other designers said. But I never had any local experience. I was not much after the worth of the job like you pay this much and that much, I said, I could survive somewhere, somehow. I can have a family. My family didn’t expect me to be supporting them. My mother is very comfortable, I said. But I wanted to have my own apartment, because I was just hitching with my uncle, near Sheridan. And I said, “how do you find my work?” And he said, “you work under my office right now, starting tomorrow you work with me. You don’t work with the other designers, it’s too small a job for you.” I said, “oh but I enjoy it.” “Yeah, but you’re wasting your talent and you’re wasting your time, and we’ll pay you.” So I said, okay.

Oh god, the projects that we worked on, some, it was really a challenge. Since I’m used to theater, used to opera, used to ballet, I would do the same feel with Marshall Fields. For 3 years we were doing fantastic sets, fantastic windows. I introduced the red carpet from one street to the other. You go to Marshall Fields at Christmastime, you have that whole red carpet, one block. The president of Marshall Fields was so amazed, shocked and worried about the cost. You carpet the whole block, and then you count all the trims coming from the ceiling, which is four stories high. But, we made good sales.

The people I met, the personalities that I met, from Elizabeth Taylor to Mikhail Baryshnikov to Bill Blass to designer Christian Lacroix, oh god, all the fabulous names that would go to Marshall Fields. My boss, Homer Sharp, he said, “your assignment.” I was enjoying it. The fashion shows, the banquets that we would design within the store – 4 years I was doing it. But the whole design department, the one that was under his wing, was so lovable. Of course there was this air of envy sometimes, with other younger designers or younger guys, you know. Who’s this Asian? But it didn’t matter to me – I just had to produce and deliver. And I did work close to 6 years with
Marshall Fields, but we got bought by Dayton and Hudson of Minneapolis. So the vice president came and said, “we are losing our jobs, you and me. All of us we’ll lose our jobs because everybody hired will be new.” Well, I said, this is not the first time – I’m not shocked anymore because I also lost my post after 15 years. Good it’s not winter.

But basically, I was also somewhat looking for space to go home to the Philippines for awhile. Go to my house and see what’s happening there with my sisters. It’s been years before I’ve gone back.

LT: Were you involved with the Filipino American community in arts and culture at this point?

WRB: Oh yes, very strongly. For the past 22 years. I’ve been here for 25 years. It’s my silver anniversary this November. And after 2 years, I was never at all introduced with the Rizal Center. I lived at Lakeshore and Irving, but I was never introduced. Finally there was this Filipino woman who said, “you must be Filipino because your name is Filipino. Buhay means life. Have you heard of the Rizal Center?” “No, I’ve heard of it, but I don’t know anybody.” “Well, you better go there and start.”

LT: But you’re very involved there now?

WRB: Oh yes, very involved. I don’t want any other post except my directorial post. As director for arts and culture, and the religious traditions. So we produce and we mount revivals of Philippine folk religious traditions. And that’s Christmas, Easter, May Holy Week, things like that. The traditional devotional forms that you see in provinces are recreated here. We have a monthly devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and that’s every first Saturday, so I got 8. We started with 8 and we go from here. I get them from here [we’re interviewing in front of a senior center at this point] and we take them and they play bingo Saturday afternoon. So after the bingo I’d say oh, we’re inviting you to the first Saturday later at 4 o clock. They would come. I made sure there is refreshments. Otherwise, they would not stay. They’d go to Leavitt Center where there is refreshments. Well, don’t spend time there, spend time here with the Virgin and we’ll have refreshments.

So what I did to get more attention is the birthday celebration. We’ll have a birthday cake. It mushroomed from 8 to 20 and now we’re more than 50. But, I enjoy the job.

Theater, there is one guy who is a local playwright, but he is not that creative as far as developing young people for theater. So I’m still looking for one who could volunteer for us, it’s all volunteer work. And so far, I was the only one to put out a Filipino American visual artist group in 1991. After 4 years, the other artists were fighting each other, so it just died a natural death. After 2 years, I created another group, until now. We see each other, we meet, we join exhibitions. One thing between this, I communicate with the Philippine Consulate office in helping put up exhibitions. Any art form of any visual artist, or performing artist, literary, is given the opportunity to exhibit, display, perform. That’s been going on for 4 generations of consulate generals.

LT: Is that at the Rizal Center or the Filipino American Historical Society?
WRB: No, the Historical Society, which I was vice president to, and I did co-founded it, but I’m trying to be very low with that now. Giving opportunity for younger people. I believe in passing the torch. I never want to be seated at the same post until I crumble. I don’t want to do that. When I’m still strong, I see a new breed coming. I always believe that. Because when I was teaching I made sure that, you see if you fail Mr. Buhay, you cannot enter the profession. They are so used to that. So I made sure that most of my students pass. Because we have this board, and even in the Philippines for interior design, we have the board examination. Once you pass that you get your license number to practice. The same token too with other visual artists. You cannot just put up an exhibition unless you are part of a particular group. Painters, graphic artists, fashion designers, sculptors, you have to belong to a group. And each group is calibrated to what type of studio, or what type of gallery you could show in. That’s how we look at the profession. Many Filipinos are artistic, creative and productive, but they can’t get to pass the acceptable standards for foreign gallery owners’ style. So we’re very careful about that. I make sure you’re here to be a career person, not just to finish your whims.

I have no regrets at all. I have been in this profession for, I graduated in 1970 and I was working since as early as 68, when all these awards were piling up I didn’t bother anymore for them because I am so used to the same people saying “its you again!” It’s me again, can you not find any other guy who can come get the award? But so far, God has blessed me. I’m not rich. And I don’t intend to be one. Because I have had so many rich relations, so many rich friends, and they’re not happy in the service of wealth. There are so many wealthy people through the centuries, but you don’t even hear of them. If you’re an artist and you carve your niche, whether it’s big or small, you’re remembered! You’re a graphic artist, you design for textiles or furniture, your design lasts and is looked at by all these people, and goes from generation to generation.

The world is so small now. It’s so easy to get yourself in one part of the world for one exhibit, so that’s what I try to make for the young Filipino artists.

LT: You’re promoting them here?

WRB: Yes. Very, I’m so focused on that. Sometimes I get into trouble with the young artists! It’s very natural for the Filipinos, especially if their parents are both Filipinos, and they grew up here, that they feel they have an edge over you.

LT: Because they’re Americans?

WRB: Yes, because they’re Americans, which doesn’t matter as far as I’m concerned, but people who are older like me, in that same group, feel very much disappointed about that kind of feel.

LT: Is it true though, that they would have an edge? Have you experienced difficulties because of your immigrant status?

WRB: No, it’s not that, but they all say, “oh, if Mr. Buhay’s going to be the judge...” That’s a very high standard of judging. But if you don’t have that standard, then you become mediocre. Then you become just a commodity. It’s not art. Sometimes it’s not appealing to some people and they said, “how could you ever judge such art?” I said, because you can feel it. Because you can feel it! It’s not just lumping all the lines and colors and because you work on it 60 hours or 120
hours it’s not... artists will do things in a jiffy. We have 10 minute sketches, things like that. It survives through the centuries. All the great artists have done it.

We just have to respect one another. We have to learn from the new breed of Filipino American artists and especially in the literary, especially in the theater. Visual arts, I don’t find much problem because they are very flexible. Lots of visual artists, they become very trendy, what’s new and what’s fresh, and you see a constant transition. In an instant, overnight he’s doing this kind of minimalism thing...

There’s one young Filipino, very young, less than thirty years old, his work was auctioned at Christie’s for 1.8 million dollars. I’m not aware of his name, but he came from the same university I graduated. And people back here say, oh it’s in black and white, there’s no color. I said, there was a buyer. So you have to hit the head of the buyer to get to see your work – that’s how I try to motivate them. Pretty soon I’ll see, because we’re having another competition. Some artists will tend toward the design style, I’m sure of that.

So, basically, I work with my art. I live with my art. There is no other kind of work that I can do. But I don’t limit myself to visual arts, because my training is interior design. I’ve done so much interior design with Filipino American families here. Special events for parties, for things like that.

**LT:** So most of your professional work has been in design, but I know you also paint. Can you tell me about your painting?

*At this point, the wind kicks up and some of his last words to this prompt are muffled. The papers he brought me fly about and as we leap to catch them he explains their contents to me.*

**WRB:** Here is some of my work, and this is my latest one-man show. After this we have group shows. I was the first Filipino artist to be included in the annual Chicago artists, which is every October. So this is a sample of what I’ve done.

*He shows me samples I haven’t previously seen.*

**LT:** Oh, your work is very graphic. From your website, I thought it was more oils.

**WRB:** Well, when I started to do acrylic – this is only acrylic content. I was asthmatic and diabetic, so I try to refrain from the oils.

*He points one out.*

This is what I had on exhibit at 15 Chicago Artist month. I have several art paintings on exhibit – this went to the window of Walgreens. And it got sold! Second day, it got sold. A Filipino, I didn’t even know her from Adam. She said, “I want that because there is Lincoln and there is Jose Rizal, our national hero.” And I had the same also, both the heroes.

My sister, Erbu, try to look for her webpage. [www.erbu55.com]

**LT:** Oh, I have seen her work, it’s very illustrative.

**WRB:** Yeah, very naive in a way.
[He references back to his work.]
And that’s me. You see, I juxtapose this and that. I love to keep changing things, the way I change the position of my furniture. When I was in Manila, I would show two artists a year: on my birthday and on Christmas dinner for my artist friends, my designer friends. And they love it. We all cook in the family. Since my mother is also a culinary professor, so there’s a lot of experimentation. A lot of surprises in the food. That’s one way we sell our family with our art forms.

Most of the fashion designers, who are really up there would expect to be invited. But with the props... I try to go minimal here. During those days, way way back, I would get flowers flown from different parts of the Philippines just for the dinner party. And sometimes I would ask my friends to come with costumes of the period, Filipino from the 17th century and we would try to make a kind of ambience, which I cannot make here. Even with the Rizal Center, even the Consulate. But one time, I attempted. I just couldn’t be stopped. I had made 25 costumes of the 17th century Philippines. I couldn’t get any model, and I wanted Filipino looking models. So I went to the consulate general and I said, “may I borrow your staff on a weekend?” “Oh you talk to them, if they agree to be there on a weekend, because we have no work Saturdays, Sundays.” Millennium Park wasn’t there yet. So what happened is, I dressed them up, had the right kind of hairstyle and right kind of headwear of the period, and we went parading down Michigan Avenue. From little kids to adults. Oh, it was such a delight! Really a delight! And we got covered by a magazine, so it’s really fun.

And that’s the kind of feel I want the people here to enjoy. Hopefully, but most of the Filipinos in town are very hardworking, and not all of them are exposed to the fine things in life. Most of the Filipinos that you see, that come from the provinces, little towns, and when I start to come up with productions like that, they would always “oh! Illustrados.”[his inflection is dismissive here]. You see, we were the ilustrados, the wealthy Filipinos with a different lifestyle than the pesanos, which means the farmers. And so I would throw a farmer’s party! With all the effects of picnic and barbecues and things like that, and they loved it. So we might have that this year for the 150 years of Rizal.

LT: So your work with Filipino American arts community is more for the benefit of the community.

WRB: Yes.

LT: It’s not so much about awareness to others outside of that community.

WRB: An awareness to other artists, yes, so we can interact well.

LT: Do you feel the Filipino American artists in Chicago have a good relationship with the larger arts community?

WRB: Most of them. Guys who are very much into the visual arts are just wanting to shine too, and getting to promote their work. One thing, though, there’s got to be a catalyst of this exposure. I don’t know if you’ve heard of the Battle of the Bamboos? It’s a yearly competition of the Philippine students, of the dancers, folk dancers with the bamboo.
**LT:** Oh, where they jump over the bamboo, I’ve seen that. Where you click it...

**WRB:** Yeah! Every year they would do that. And so that’s one thing where they wanted me by the judge. I said, “oh my god! Is this good or is this bad?” I said, “it’s neither.” I didn’t want to influence him. He was one of the judges! I said, “this is the wrong costume for the dance.” The wrong costume can be forgiven, but this is the wrong music for the wrong dance! Whoever did it has taken too much liberty, too much artistic liberty. And I went to approach the choreographer – she never spoke to me again. She will see me sometimes, she will take her face out of my sight. I said, “how will the kids know their culture?” You can wear the shirt different from the skirt, but the music... how did you create the choreography with the wrong music with the steps?

And so that really triggered things. I refrain from the folk dancing. I let the choreographers do that. There are quite a good number of choreographers here. But, since many Filipinos are so used to free entertainment, they’ll never pay more than $10 for a ticket to a good performance. So that’s the dilemma of many playwrights and directors and actors. If it’s music, they still may pay more than $10 for a concert, because you know, there’s music! But if it’s stage play or folk dancing, that’s too much for them. They always say, “Oh, I can bring my husband to dinner for $10!” How do you go about it? So that’s our dilemma.

Here at the Rizal Center, a few years back, there was a very visible theater. Well, many of the performers left for the suburbs when they grow richer, it’s crazy. I say why do you isolate yourself? You have to be where the hub is! So we can come up with our own Filipino village, you know, like the Indians at Devon, we don’t even have that. We’ve been here for over 100 years, the early settlers.

They’re very scattered. That’s why if you want some Filipino goodies, you say, “oh, which part of Chicago?” Oh, there’s no district. So if you want a native rice cake you have to really look for it.

**LT:** Why do you think that is?

**WRB:** Regional differences. Since we come from – you know there are more than 182 languages in the Philippines, not just Tagalog. Tagalog is the national language. The older ones speak Spanish. But our generation are English speaking. We even learn American folk tales earlier than we learn our own local folk tales. We learn American brands before we learn local brands, because the local brands would not last long! Anything made in the US, like Frigidaire, they last long. And it’s a status symbol, especially in the 50s and the 60s, and even fashion. Comes from the United States, “Oo!” They’ll pay and arm and a leg, but they’ll bargain with a local designer until they cry! It’s very Filipino. I know my people so well.

**LT:** So because of how regional it is, it’s hard to have that unified community.

**WRB:** It’s like you crossing Illinois to the next state. The next state is a different culture, different language, different norms. The Spaniards made that for us. They didn’t want the Philippines to mix and match, because they might go on revolution. So you could go from one province to the other, you should have an ID to cross. And you tell the guard how long you stay, and if you don’t come back, you’re put in jail in those days.
LT: Oh, that makes a lot of sense – that translates how to everyone relates here.

WRB: Yes. You have those from the north, those from the south, they will not even marry one another. My grandfather would say, “not one of my kids should marry from the north!” We ended up having two – one aunt and uncle marrying from the north. Some people would feel, “oh they are commoners” and it’s not worth it for us. Even the churches, even church people! It’s a culture, and it can’t be changed fast. We definitely have to wait for some time. But hopefully... so far, I’ve seen progress. I’ve seen progress during the Marcos era, but now, it’s too different and too fast.

A lot of farms are being changed to subdivisions and commercial centers, which is not good, because we’re an agricultural country, and we need to stay as an agricultural country. Like antiquities. We lost lots of our antiquities because of trading. They ransack old houses, old churches, old buildings, and then they sell it by the truckload. That’s how we lose our heritage, when young people don’t seem to respect anymore the values of the old.

Even in the Philippines, I was part of a heritage society. That’s why I joined the Philippine American Historical Society here. But it’s a different setup. In the Philippines, it’s more of a preservation of old houses, don’t demolish them for new ones.

LT: I was wondering, are there any artists that have particularly inspired you, that you would cite as your influences?

WRB: This is how it is with my painterly nature. I saw my mom paint, and she paints in the very old classic way of one of our masters to whom she was related, and I would imitate her. I started to paint when I was 4 or 5 years old. Whether I would be appreciated or not, I ended up having little canvases. I preferred religious paintings. And I wanted to be a monk. I wanted to get into the Benedictine order where I studies, but I got sick. I’d get up 3 o clock in the morning to wash bathrooms and kitchens, and so my father said “it’s crazy, I didn’t put you to school to be serving the priests. You want to be a priest, when you’re ready. After high school or college.” So he took me.

The influence later in my life is the things that I see in the books, in the movies, and in my travels. And I was very impressed with Chagall. Very very much impressed with Chagall. Because I believed in the free juxtaposition of figures and colors, and no dominating color, it’s always like a rainbow. It’s playful, it’s cheery, it’s true! There were other Impressionists who I liked, like Monet, the Impressionists really did much for my early work. But when I was growing up, I had a chance to go to Mexico. That’s why I said influences make a lot, especially for a young artist. I was so impressed with the majestic, huge murals of religious icons. So I started to do them. And I started to make money off it.

My mother especially would support me with my art, because she was painting too. She had a little studio, and no one could touch it except me. So, that kind of relationship with my mom really started my freewheeling on my work. My father thought that it was just like, la passion, which is like a hobby. Never took it seriously. When I started in high school to tell him that I want to be a painter. He said “painters are poor! Look, we have one neighbor who is a master, look at Serafine!”
Agriculture. And I told him straight “no! I’m going to be an artist!” He was quiet the whole time. “I even reserved an apartment for you so you can study with no distraction.” I said, no, I don’t like that, I want to go into the fine arts. He said “okay.” Just like that, okay. The next day, he never spoke to me for the whole day. The next day, he was at me again. “Oh, go to blah blah blah.” I’ll think about it. “Okay, you think about it.” Finally, he said, “are you going for agriculture?” No, I’m going to UP for the arts. “Oh god.” He had a heart attack. I felt so guilty.

LT: He did literally?

WRB: Yes, he had a heart attack! His first, he was 46. Because I was the eldest... and I felt so guilty! I was 20 years old. So I went to UP to please my father, I was in that line where the students were enrolling in agriculture. And I said god, I don’t think so, this is my group? I could see the students. They were completely different from the kind of students I had been exposed with. I said, oh god. But I tried. Two, three guys before me was the end of the day, and that was the last day of agriculture, so I was guilty. So I said, there is no more university that will take me in! The next day, the newspaper had an extension for enrollment in the University of Santo Tomas. Just for fine arts. Architecture and fine arts. So I said I think I’m going to architecture, not fine arts. Then I remembered, my aunt had just hired an interior designer from the states and she paid an arm and a leg. I think I’ll go into interior design instead of fine arts. And it was all girls in the line! I got in. I passed the entrance examination.

After one semester, my father’s secretary asked me, “your dad wants to know if you entered the college for agriculture.” I said tell Dad I went to architecture. She heard wrong. She thought I went to agriculture instead of architecture. So she reported to my dad and he was so relieved. So that was the first heart attack! He had three heart attacks and he died. But anyway, he learned about me getting into architecture through the report card, because parents have to sign the report card. So he says, “Ok, you’re old enough and you’re man enough to make the decision, I will only pay for your tuition fees. You find your way to work with your materials.” So I learned how to paint and sell my work. I would sell to my grandmother, to my aunt, to my cousin, to my father’s office mates, things like that. So that made me survive. The same way I survive now – the big projects don’t come fast or easy. But the small ones will put the bread on your table, pay the bills. So I’m patient. I’m working on two books this time.

LT: What are these books about?

WRB: One is about the hero and one about my Marcos portfolio. I should have had this out in the press 7 years ago, but our First Lady, El De Marcos returned home, so the last chapters had to change. I lost everything, old friends and associates don’t want to talk with me because I am associated with the past era. And my collection, my home... but that’s life. But that’s the life of being an artist, I have no regrets.

LT: As far as the Filipino artist community here, do you feel there is a theme or an aesthetic that sets it apart from other bicultural art?
WRB: If we’ll stick to the traditional art form, there is that very obvious difference with Filipino art form. The message of the art, the way it appeals to the Philippines, people who’ve visited, it’s very strong. Because many use the visual effects of the islands. And tribal costumes. There are many masters who’ve done this, but they are hard to find now because they are in museums, in private collections, banks. And that separates us from China, Korea, and others. Like the Thai. Even in music, in theater, it’s a different shape. Catholic themes, and the political issues too. The common trend now, for younger artists, is to be very contemporary, so it gets to be abstract. That is the trend now that is also to mix match, which is what I am doing. I try to mimic the black white block effect in some of my risk works, with graphic colors and triptychs. With one big color and one contrasting color. I love to do collage, too. I was doing even sculpture pieces in collages. I just started to do that. But I experimented ceramics, too. Wood and brass. Back at home, my studio has one for paper art and one for the dirty art, like blacksmith and things like that. Same thing with the kitchen, there’s the native kitchen and like that.

I started the abstract after I came to the US. But I noticed some Filipino artists would bypass the traditional form. Because they’d rather get the masters even if its a reproductions, but I won’t do reproductions, even if there is money in that. I have done fantastic, and quite a good number of costumes for ballets and operas. I would design it, I would cut, I would put it in paper structure, but I don’t sew. I’m so afraid of my fingers getting hit by the needle. I miss the business, I’d been doing formal gowns before I came here, but people get confused with what I do. Every now and then I get invited to the fashion shows at the Art Institute. I love to experiment with Philippine local materials.

LT: I heard you were involved in building the Philippine coral reef at the Shedd Aquarium. You usually don’t hear about artists doing that.

WRB: The Philippine Society was invited to a buffet, a cocktail party. And they said, “we want your artists in the community to help make a reef in the Shedd.” So we met with the scientists, there were several artists too, but I was the one who survived.

LT: What did they have you do?

WRB: The concept was an island – not a whole island, but a section. And there’s a part which says, “welcome to the coral reef”. And I know the original owner of the island, because it was lost during the war. Just a little portion of a fisherman’s. A facade. So I had to answer, how does it look? What is it made of? How tall is it? The weather? All the concepts to make it look like the island. The house, the hut, the way people would throw away their empty cans and use them as flower boxes. Recycling, basically the concept of recycling. The Filipinos are so good with that, because basically surviving two wars and the revolution, people were so malleable to change of this to that. They’re surviving, that’s how it is. And so that’s it, 7 to 8 years work, constant monthly meetings. They would make prototypes, I’d say no, it doesn’t look like that. This is how you construct it. The final thing, I’m happy with it. The only thing that’s missing is the smell, the salt. The waves, the sound, the music of the waves slapping, it’s all there. But that’s been there 10 years now.

These days, I don’t want to steal the thunder. We’re such a small community and people will
snub you for competition. Let the other names come out! Let’s be plentiful, not just one or two. It’s not good if the same people always get to represent the country.

LT: Is there anything else you want people to know about?

WRB: Well, the Rizalia. Not just because I’m related to the hero, but because I would want more Filipino Americans, Americans too, to address Rizal. After 150 years of his execution, he is still not known in mainstream. He was the first hero for peaceful reform. We are the first independent country in Asia because of him. We were under colonial powers, Spain, the US and Japan. People need to know the writings of Rizal, because it’s very universal. The concept of man wanting to be free. It’s got to be learned, not just by students.

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