

A black and white photograph of a woman, Ana Valdes Lim, sitting on a couch. She is smiling broadly, showing her teeth, and gesturing with both hands as if in the middle of a conversation. She has short dark hair and is wearing a dark-colored top and a dark skirt. The background shows a white headboard and a striped pillow.

From Me to We

A Conversation
with Ana Valdes Lim

“I worked with Joe Papp and Shakespeare in the Park with Estelle Parsons. We were like the ethnic Shakespeare Company in New York.”

“When I’ve had defeats and difficult times in my life, I knew the answers were somewhere in the perennial wisdoms, which are love and truth. I knew that materiality was not the way, and competition was a trap.”

I met Ana Valdes Lim at a ServiceSpace retreat in Northern California. I’d already read something about her background at Julliard and the remarkable theater work she’s doing in Manila through Assumption College. Spending three plus days together with her in person was a quite a treat. We all felt lifted by her warmth, liveliness and unreserved engagement.

I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to ask her for an interview. I’d read that, for Julliard’s centennial, Ana was among the one hundred graduates featured in a magazine that was produced for the occasion. I had some idea about her theater work in Manila, but otherwise knew nothing of her journey. I didn’t know, for instance, that with the help of a grant from Julliard, she’d written Workshop, A Manual on Acting (1997) with exercises on actor training and rehearsal practices. Her book, Evolutionary Theater: A Book for Actors, Directors and Teachers followed in 2009. And then Theater for Wellness: Creative Techniques to be Well and Whole was published in 2016. These last two were written to share and support Filipino artists.

I wanted to learn more about her unique journey and, as we begin, Ana is reflecting about her studies at Julliard.

Ana Valdes Lim: This was a few years before the hit musical, *Miss Saigon*. So, Asians in theater, we weren’t visible. *Miss Saigon* was a turning point, I think, for

Asians in Broadway musicals. Anyway, going to Julliard felt like home. It was like I was a fish and finally found water. I took to the exercises readily and had such a happy time there. The teachers were very fierce sometimes in their criticism, but never to the point that I found the school so difficult. I had a very good experience. I met teachers who mentored me, and I just bloomed, you know?

works: How wonderful.

Ana: I was meant to go there. It was like this miracle. The first day we were in school, many of the faculty had not seen us. There were twenty-six of us, and they usually chose twelve male and twelve female. We were two more, and in those days they might eliminate you at any time.

works: So that possibility was hanging over your head?

Ana: Yes. It made life stressful, but it made me more determined.

works: You were in an early class in the Theater Department at Julliard, right?

Ana: Yes. There were people who became famous later on. Kevin Kline was already in *Pirates of Penzance* on Broadway. Robin Williams was already doing *Mork and Mindy*. Anyway, I found the school joyful—and painful—in the sense that you are critiqued and it causes tears. But I felt I’d found where I was meant to be.

works: I’m sure there were many memorable moments. Do any come to mind?

Ana: When we first started, they asked us to do our audition pieces and after I presented to the faculty, I was asked only one question: “Are you interested in teaching?” I thought it was an unusual question. Maybe there were no jobs for Asians at the time.

Then Judy Liebowitz was one of our teachers. She had an expression, something like “be willing not to know.” She encouraged us to recognize the unknown when it’s happening, and to let it be unknown. It’s such a deep, spiritual lesson for life, and so counterintuitive, because you go to Julliard and think you’re going to

learn techniques, you know?

I don't remember having any books. I remember a notebook, but they don't tell you "this is your exercise." They would look at you and only give you the exercise you needed. I didn't feel like I knew any techniques I could name when I graduated. But I felt fully formed, like I'd been exorcised. So those are two things. One is the realization that allowing yourself to be in the unknown is the birthplace. The second is I wasn't given techniques and names and theories.

works: How many teachers did you have?

Ana: We had two teachers for voice and speaking—diction and accents—then singing, movement, a Shakespeare class, a poetry class and improvisation—three hours, twice a week—which used to scare me. We were given so much improvisation. Even in movement, first, we were taught a technique and then we were taught to improvise. Sometimes we'd have live accompaniment—percussion, piano, or just sounds that the accompanist would make.

works: Recently, I got a little insight into what it must be like to be among a group of actors working together. Three of us were preparing a performance in relation to "The Conference of the Birds," the wonderful old Sufi tale. A real feeling of connection developed, and I thought this must often take place in a group of actors. Would you agree?

Ana: Yes. That's correct. In what they call "the ensemble" you get to know each other very well, because you spend nine a.m. to ten p.m. every day together.

works: I imagine that kind of closeness could be pretty special.

Ana: It's incredible. You really deep dive with everybody. With some of the exercises, you're in tears, or you have all the emotions out, and people are there to witness the whole journey. So, the goal is to have that range and facility and accessibility to all of that, and then to be able to direct it so a director can shape it.

works: Most of us have no education around our emotions and how to relate to them. I mean, this would have to be a real growth experience.

"I was able to talk my way into fine arts, and for the first time in my life, I was around people I was somewhat comfortable with. And the professors were people I could have a conversation with—not necessarily a lengthy conversation. I could ask them questions and wasn't terrified of who they were."

Ana: Absolutely. I think I got chosen because I have a range of emotions and I have access—and I was taught to control them. For example, I was told, "Ana, if Shakespeare meant you to cry through all of those lines, he would have just written, 'Oh, woe, woe, woe, woe, woe.' You have to get the lines out." So, I know that I need to play the notes, but I'm riding on this emotion.

I don't know if they were interested in the roots of these emotions. I discovered that for myself. Then, because of doing it so many times, I learned to be an alchemist; I learned to conjure them. In the beginning I conjured them from memory, but later I conjured them from imagination. Then afterwards it was my body's memory that conjured them with other actors. Emotional actor training also taught me not to be attached to the emotion. I learned that we're not our feelings. I learned to recognize the observer of the feelings.

works: That's fascinating.



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works: How many years of experience have you had since you got out of Juilliard?

Ana: I graduated '84, so close to 35 years.

works: And give me a little history of your work in the theater before going back to the Philippines.

Ana: I worked with Joe Papp and Shakespeare in the Park with Estelle Parsons. We were like the ethnic Shakespeare Company in New York. Then I worked with Berkeley Rep. I did the La Jolla Playhouse. I was auditioning, getting jobs, acting, and then temping. I did a couple of commercials; I did some film; I found that I didn't like film and I didn't like TV.

I did a couple of episodes for *As the World Turns*. I didn't like the medium, but I wasn't brave enough to say that. I just had this feeling of the industry being too cold. They shoot out of sequence, the people are different and you don't really have a relationship with them. I'd be in my trailer. I'd meet an actor. I didn't know him, except that he's going to be the person in the script.

So I didn't like that environment much. I also didn't like the lottery of auditioning.

Ana: Isn't it fascinating?

works: Very much so. Do you feel yourself fortunate in getting this unusual education?

Ana: Absolutely. A gift. I feel like I've been to some monastery where I had this deep training, and I'm transferring it now. And it does take care, because the first time the individual goes deep, that's a very sensitive spot. But that's the work we do. We need to stand on stage and have something authentic—or the root of something authentic—so that those watching go through it with us.

works: Because if you're authentically yourself, it will be felt.

Ana: Yes. And if you have to cry and have an emotional scene, you can't carry that twenty-four hours a day. So I developed a practice where I can live life. I don't really need to be abnormal and irregular in my life. I learned about my inner landscape, that there are thoughts, feelings, the body—and the witness of all these. The observer inside an actor is very important. It's the place where I go to be quiet.

It was a numbers game. If you auditioned often, then you'd get something. As an Asian actress—in my eyes, and in my agent's eyes—I was successful. But too much of my energy was being depleted. I wasn't happy, but I didn't know what to do yet.

works: You mentioned Joe Papp. Would you reflect on some of your experiences working with him?

Ana: Working at the Public Theater—Joe Papp was the artistic director—was considered, and is still considered today, quite an accomplishment for a legitimate actor. We call them “legitimate actors,” meaning you do straight theater and this is your profession; you're not a celebrity. Those of us working at the Public Theater were from many different countries and ethnic backgrounds. It was beautiful to have that experience of being a global company—one world. Our color, accent, and ethnicity didn't hinder the storytelling. I feel happy and proud I was able to work at the Public Theater because of this. I was definitely a working actor and, although acting is still my joy, I had much more energy than could be satisfied in that environment. So I was unhappy.

works: What did you take from your whole experience of learning to act—going through Juilliard and out into the acting world? Was there a carryover that was useful in how you related to people?

Ana: Well, you can see that I'm very friendly and have this kind of open energy. At Juilliard, I learned to be open to many people and experiences. I learned playfulness, to act with courage—even in unknown circumstances—and to offer and accept what others were giving me. I learned to believe in the imaginary circumstances of a story. And as I said, between acting jobs, I would temp. I had a boss where I temped and I'd tell him, “I have a pilot. I have to shoot next week. So can I be absent next week?”

He'd say, “Ana, you're not a secretary. You're just pretending to be a secretary.” I guess on some level, I was “pretending” or acting the job I had to do.

works: So, after New York you went to the West Coast—to LA, down to San Diego and then up to Berkeley?

Ana: Yes. That's the life of an actress. Right? You go,

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you audition—and then you get three months here, two months there. You live out of a suitcase. It was in 1992—after ten or eleven years in New York and some time on the West Coast—when I went to Hawaii. I was burnt out.

works: Would you say something about the burnout?

Ana: I didn't like getting up in the morning and not having a job; having to temp, or sign-up for unemployment until the next job; then going for auditions. I didn't like that feeling of a rollercoaster up and down, sometimes having a job and sometimes not. I liked working, but I needed to work steady. I wanted a place to go every day. So when I was in Hawaii, I decided to go to the university and get another degree. And I did. I got a degree to become a teacher of elementary education.

works: Did you work in Hawaii as a teacher?

Ana: For a while. Then I met my husband, Ricky, who was already in Manila. He'd been educated in the States, and he said, “If we all leave the Philippines, what will happen to our country?”

I had roots there, so I said, “Okay.” And we returned to Manila. I didn't know if I would like living in the Philippines.

works: When your husband spoke about going back to the Philippines, that touched you.

Ana: Yes. I can't describe it, because I had mixed feelings. The Philippines was “a calling.”

works: I have a friend, Rogelio, from the Philippines,

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and I spent a little time with him a couple of years ago in India. In one of our conversations, he said, “The people in the Philippines have low self-esteem and I wish I could figure out how to go back to the Philippines and help them have better self-esteem.” Does that make sense to you?

Ana: That makes sense, yes. That’s true. We are humble, service-oriented, happy, resilient, caring, spiritual people. The people are not easy to describe, because we hold contradictions.

works: So you went back to the Philippines, and then?

Ana: I just started applying, I mean cold-calling. I’m kind of fearless. I’d knock on a door and I’d have my portfolio. I didn’t make money an issue; it was, “Do you need a teacher? Do you need an actress?” But I also thought, why would I compete with Filipino actresses? When I auditioned, I felt like I was robbing them. So, what was the next job? Teaching. But there was a calling, a yearning, a desire to do something through theater for others. And I thought, “I’ll just come and support the production.” In fact, in Hawaii, there was a play with a famous director, Behn Cervantes. I sent him my resumé while I was a student in Hawaii and he didn’t respond. I thought, “How could you not respond? Your play is about the Philippines. I’m a trained Filipino actress.” So, I went to him and said, “I sent you my resume!” It was a bit fearless.

He said, “I can’t take you. You’ll cause an imbalance in my cast because you’re too well trained.”

I said, “Okay. Well, can I teach?”

He said, “What do you know how to teach?”

“I can warm-up your cast. I can give them acting workshops. I can just help in whatever way. I’m so used to rehearsals.”

He said, “Okay. When can you start?”

“Right now! I’ll warm them up, right now!”

My point here is that I wouldn’t take no for an answer, even if there was a rejection at first. I desired so much to help and to be in the theater. I felt it was my calling.

So, I started teaching. As Peter Brooks said, “Whenever you want to direct, just keep saying ‘yes.’” So I just said “yes” and started opening classes and teaching.

works: So it wasn’t long before you found your way into that community.

Ana: Right. I started to have classes.

works: So let’s fast-forward; now you’re in charge of a theater.

Ana: Yes, a big theater connected to a Roman Catholic school, Assumption College. I’m in my 15th year as artistic director. We have a college community theater; they’re not uncommon, right? They’re tuition driven, so there’s income supporting them, and we have a facility that seats a thousand people.

I happened to show up when they were renovating their theater, and I asked, “Have you planned who will run this?”

The Sisters said, “No.” My own biological sister was an ex-nun from the same Order, but let me backtrack a little bit.

works: Good.

Ana: In Manila, in the beginning, I was renting space, having a studio, working in one theater company or another. At one point I looked up to the sky and talked to God. I said, “God, you gave me so much talent. I need a home. You didn’t give me this talent just to kick me around. I need some place to be more settled. Please send me a home.”

And within three months of that silent prayer, I received a call to visit Assumption College. Earlier, I’d written to them asking if they had a room I could rent

for my workshops. Anyway, they called me and I met the president.

She said, "I want you to think outside of the box," and she showed me a theater under renovation. There was no roof; it was rubble. She said, "We're rebuilding this theater for a thousand seats."

I said, "Who's going to run it?"

She said, "I don't know."

I knew they didn't have the skill set to run a theater. I knew administration and HR and finance. I can make a financial statement. So, I presented to the president's council and told them all the things they needed to run a theater.

They asked me, "Can you stay and run it?"

I said, "No," because I felt I belonged outside, not in a Catholic school, and this woman said, "Where do you think you're going?"

works: That's funny.

Ana: Yeah. I said, "I'm not going to work here; I need to work in the real world."

She said, "Don't you see that you're a teacher?"

I said, "No, no, no. Teaching is my day job. I'm an actress, I'm a director. I'm..."

She said, "You should look at the faces of the children when you're talking. I mean, just look at their faces. Take a moment."

And I saw the faces and realized there was something deeper. So I stayed. I saw there was something transformative that could happen, beyond just the techniques of teaching theater. So, theater became a conduit for something deeper.

works: That's very touching.

Ana: I feel that coming to the Philippines—teaching; working at the prisons, outreach projects and advocacies; and meeting you—is all part of a divine dance; it was all meant to be. The teaching changed me to live deeper. That's the change that happened for me. As an actor at Juilliard, I learned techniques to make "me" better. But when I started teaching, the shift from "me" to "we" happened, and then the whole inner and outer universe began to shift.

works: Wow. Would you say more about the spectrum of your students, their ages, and how the theater is connected with the college and also with the

"We didn't want theater to be a vehicle for making you the 'best,' like a narcissistic thing. We wanted it to be a hub for a new way of relating to each other, which is not necessarily verbal, and having an embrace of loving kindness. This is to enable you to feel whole and loved. You will be affirmed on stage certainly, but it's not so that you can outshine another."

public—just a little overview of how all that works.

Ana: Okay. We get students during their third year, juniors in college, or even younger, because we run a big ship. For the very small ones we have ballet after school and we have programs for street dancing and voice classes.

works: And your role again in all this?

Ana: Artistic director. I take care of hiring, making sure the program works, taking care of fees. That has to happen in order to have a place for these students to take their classes.

works: I understand there are elementary and high school students, and you get some as early as third grade. Is that right?

Ana: Yes. Even younger and up to adult—singing,



dancing, acting and then classical ballet for the little ones.

works: So, there's the whole spectrum.

Ana: Afterschool, co-curricular to college and beyond. It's a big ship. We do one musical a year with a cast of three hundred that includes third grade to college—and some adult guest artists. We rehearse eight months of the year. Each year, for the performers, this is a peak experience.

Then for high school, we do the Shakespeare Festival—*Julius Caesar*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet* and *MacBeth* with about 120 participants. I direct those and have another director with me. But I don't direct all the plays anymore, although I do work with the directors and the choreographers.

works: Wow.

Ana: We have about 80 to 120 high school girls—9th to 12th grade—and they're pre-selected by their

teachers to do a scene from Shakespeare. These are viewed by a thousand people. They have a week of Shakespeare, where they dress in Shakespearean style, they have a Shakespeare quiz bee and all kinds of things that help them appreciate the literature. Then for college, we have a performing arts program. So, they learn solfeggio.

works: What's that?

Ana: Singing. And they study movement—all the things required to be a performing artist. However, they also have math, science, and general education subjects with their performance classes. So it's like liberal arts with a major in performing arts.

works: Okay.

Ana: For the college show, we bring professional actors in and rehearse for nine months. We pick about four male, professional actors to work with these college students. We have them in their junior

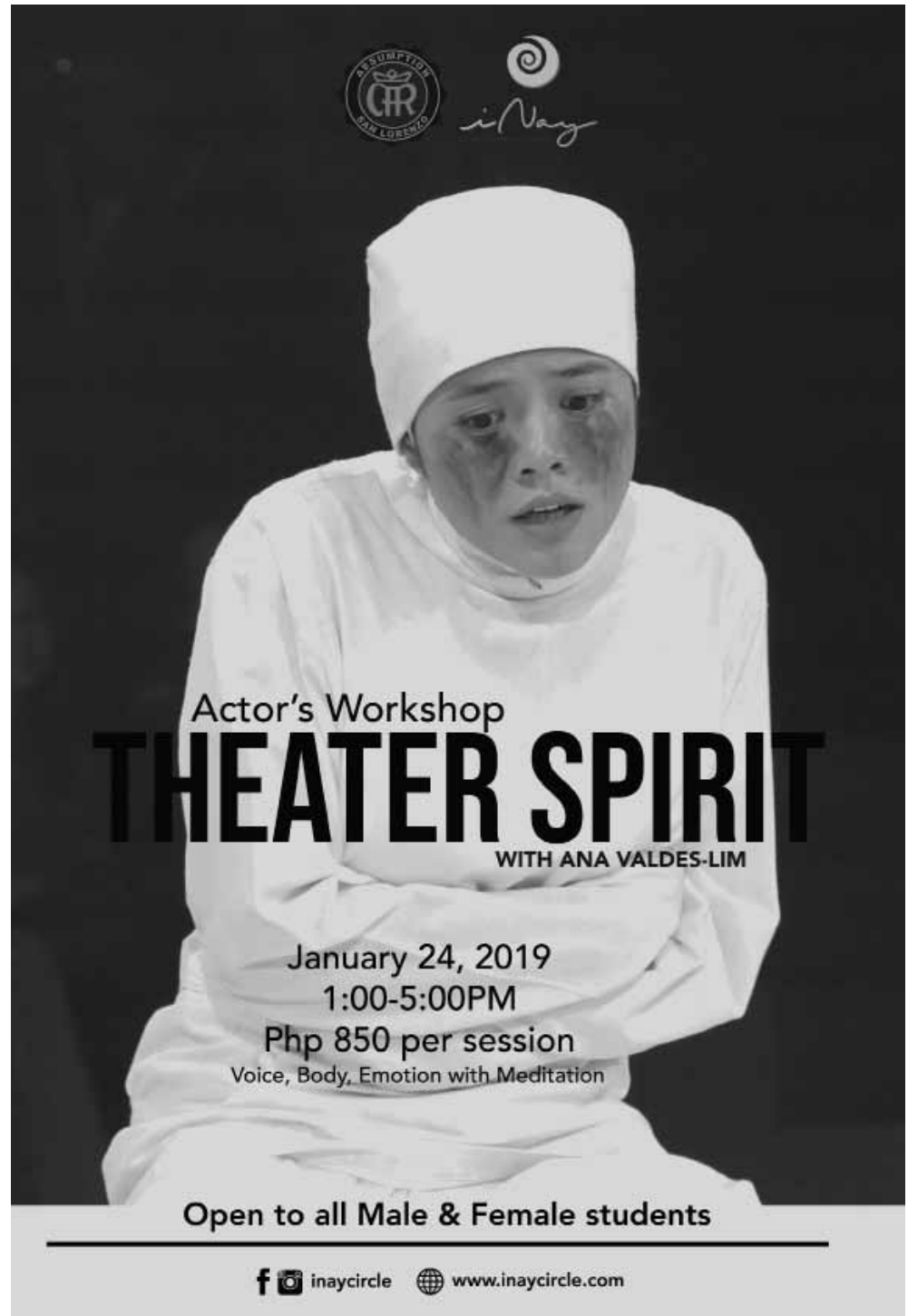
and senior years so in those two years, we do *Hamlet* and *MacBeth*, and this year we're doing *As You Like It*. There are about ten shows for one production. For *Hamlet*, we have six shows and for *As You Like It*, we have ten. That's a lot of shows for a student.

It's a beautiful, unique challenge to participate with and support young talents in their peak performances, and to hold their learning and development into whole human beings as our primary purpose. The old paradigm I learned at Juilliard was that the show quality must be excellent. What I learned here, as a teacher, was not to set show quality as the top priority, but to hold the students' process, and their learning and transformative experience, as the reward itself.

Then we invite other schools to watch. So, let's say we have ten public shows. I'd say five or six would be internal fellow students, meaning our community sees them, then two or three are public shows, and then two shows are advocacy shows—meaning we look for donors to pay for the show. Then we look for the underprivileged audience, and we bring them in to see the Shakespeare.

works: What's an advocacy show?

Ana: An advocacy show is when we have the entire show gifted for a specific audience. We invite public schools, or less privileged schools, to watch the show as a gift. Privately, we



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find a donor who will pay forward the show. Sometimes our advocacy show is performed off-site, as in the case of the prisons, where we performed *All's Well That Ends Well*.

We also have other advocacy shows where the participants are the actors, for example in the prisons. We visit them weekly. They perform the scenes from Shakespeare, and we include songs and dances. We also have another

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advocacy where we support the acting students in high school on Sundays by helping them stage their show. This is our way of reaching beyond our campus to less privileged communities and bringing culture and arts to them. Again, the reward is in the process.

We call that “metta.” Our department is also called Metta; Marie Eugenie is the foundress. She was a saint. It’s the Marie Eugenie Theater of The Assumption, so Metta. However, when we selected the name of the theater, the first choice was *meta*, which is Greek for going beyond. But we changed it to *metta*, meaning loving kindness.

We didn’t want theater to be a vehicle for making you the “best,” like a narcissistic thing. We wanted it to be a hub for a new way of relating to each other, which is not necessarily verbal, and having an embrace of loving kindness. This is to enable you to feel whole and loved. You will be affirmed on stage certainly, but it’s not so that you can outshine another.

works: That’s beautiful. How did you come to this? There would be some history, I would think.

Ana: When I had difficult times and suffering in life—I experienced the death of two of my brothers and much difficulty in our family—I learned that one has to keep forgiving and letting go, letting go of self-adulation, accumulation of achievements and aggrandizement. All that has to go, and love is all that remains in the end.

Fortunately I’ve always been drawn to India

and drawn to meditation—meditation, silence and prayer. When I’ve had defeats and difficult times in my life, I knew the answers were somewhere in the perennial wisdoms, which are love and truth. I knew that materiality was not the way, and competition was a trap. Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, the Dalai Lama—those are the people I considered my beacons. This has been very important, this change. At work I also share these values with the students and parents I encounter. I’ve had to talk to parents who want their daughter to be the best, the brightest star, or the “first.” For example, “Is this my daughter’s part? She’s been eight years at Metta!”

I have to journey with them: one, to trust the coach and director; second, give a chance to others. “Because maybe the lesson of letting go is the biggest character development that your daughter needs to learn now.” Another is, “You know she’s happy. So, is this something about you and your expectations, or is it her?” Does she know you’re speaking to me about this?”

So, it’s quite a conversation. But I always approach the parents with love—and sometimes maybe our children are teaching us.

works: That’s really wonderful.

Ana: That’s the metta; that’s the process to take. Right?

works: Yes. That’s lovely. Now there’s this other person, Anjo. Is he part of the theater?

Ana: Yes. Anjo works with me and is now directing. Anjo is a teacher, director and stage manager. He started out as a stage manager and, like all of us in our organization, the skill set we have is theater, but what we’re sharing is really something deeper. It’s love and kindness, which is really rooted in this subtle oneness—the way of awareness.

works: I saw his name in that piece on the theater I read in ServiceSpace.

Ana: Yes. He went to Gandhi 3.0 with me [a ServiceSpace retreat].

works: Was your experience at Gandhi 3.0 a new chapter? What would you say?

Ana: I was always searching for something deeper, because I didn't feel that excellence, or being "the best," was it. Then I met Nimo online [Nimesh Patel, Empty Hands Music]. One of his songs popped up, maybe in a Google search. It was beautiful. So I wrote and asked, "Are your songs really free?" He said, "Yes." So I took his songs, and Anjo and I taught them to the prisoners, and to the many children.

works: Would you say something more about the prison connection?

Ana: Somebody said to me one day, "Ana, you have to come to the prison and see the youth in the prison." I said, "Sure." But I really had no intention of doing that.

Then she called me again and I owed her a favor, so I had to go. When I got there, I just sat and listened to them sing. They sang the lyrics from experience. Just in their opening prayer song, they were in that experience. That first day I went to prison, I thought, "I need to come back here. I need to support them." Now we teach inmates every week, theater scenes and exercises.

I knew I was given this skill set as a gift from God, and even if I had a lot of work to do, I felt I had to share this. It takes a whole afternoon to go to the prison, and some days I'm tired. But I just stopped my mind from thinking and turned to the music. I explained the exercise to them, and just sat back—because I was so tired. And Richard, I wasn't teaching, but they bloomed like flowers!

The inmates are our brothers and sisters. It takes so little to see them bloom with joy. And they are so talented, so full of expression, hope, and generosity. It's truly a blessing to be with them. I receive way more than I give. The Theater Arts classes, and College Guild are the bright spots of hope and beauty in our prison system.

You can see in a human being's face—you can even see it in a dog—when the face changes, and joy begins to appear. What comes out is beautiful and light. I was watching them, thinking, "This is what I'm supposed to do. I'm supposed to show up and then this thing is going to pass through them."

I wasn't doing anything. I was sitting in a chair. I had just turned the music on. We play Nimo's songs and they dance with so much joy and energy. You can literally see their mood and energy field shift to some

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inner place brighter and happier. What a gift to be in their midst.

At that moment, I thought, "I'm like the sun. Does the sun say, 'Oh, shine, shine, shine?'" The sun doesn't say that. So, I thought, "This is it! I don't need to think about it. It's what I have to do."

So, that shift started when I felt I needed to show up at the prison. I used to think I had to prepare so much for a class. But at the prison, they take to the lessons so fast. They act truthfully and from a deep authentic source. Lyrics in a song, sung with their fullness of hope and suffering, transforms into a stunning performance. They have so much heart. People who see their performances are moved beyond words. Going to the prisons has been a gift. We dance something divine. It is true—because I've experienced it—that in the deepest suffering, joy and beauty can emerge.

works: Thank you for sharing that. I can see how Nimo would fit right in here. So say more about your connection with him.

Ana: I'd started to use his music and saw the transformation, so I emailed him asking, "What does it take to get you here? Can you teach a workshop?" And you know how Nimo is; he came. Some people are like sunflowers, you know; they just face the sun.



Nimo and his music are transformative. His music brings joy. We share his songs with so many people.

works: I've seen Nimo perform just once—spontaneously, without being all set up—but that's all I needed to see. Right?

Ana: That's his ray of sun. So, he said, "Ana, you and Anjo should go to this retreat in India." I knew nothing of Nipun [Mehta]. I just said, "Okay." And when I went there, like the first day, I thought it was a cult. Everybody was so nice. I asked Bonnie [Rose]—she was my roommate—"Is this a cult? Do we get a bill afterwards? How does this work?"

Bonnie said, "I have a cynical roommate. Yay!" [laughs]

I didn't believe that something would be given for free, just like that—and that changed me. But I was kind of on the path already, Richard. So back to Manila. I teach a comedy class, so I said, "Let's call it Kindness Comedy and offer it on a pay-it-forward basis." Ten had

signed up, but then twenty-two came.

Then I started the retreats this year. I wanted to do a Karma Kitchen. Our kitchen on campus had flooded and we couldn't cook. So we decided to have it cooked in the school cafeteria and then we packaged the food in banana leaves to avoid using plastic. On one day we brought 267 meals to the homeless. On a regular day, we bring 200. In twenty minutes, the meals were gone.

I would tell the retreat participants, "Bring anything you want to give away. Roll it and put a ribbon around it." We started packaging baby clothes, shoes, adult shorts. We each would take two bags and we didn't have a permit. The security guards would say, "Do you have a permit?"

I would just say, "We're on our way out. Thank you for doing your job." The truth is, 200 meals—15 minutes and they're gone.

We did six retreats where we'd go out to the streets. In one of them I said, "I think we should sing with them." We were doing tangible things and a prayer circle, so we brought drums and maracas and

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did a drum circle and dancing movement with them. We started to do that as well in public spaces.

works: Is this a new thing for you, going out and initiating things with strangers?

Ana: Yes, yes.

works: How is that for you?

Ana: I was scared the first day when I saw thirty policemen under a cluster of trees. I said, “Anjo, let’s just stay close, open our big posters that say ‘Love,’ and let’s just be brave.” We had these banana leaf meals, so I went up to a policeman and said, “*Kuya*” (big brother), please, this is our offering to you. It’s lunch.”

He said, “What’s this for?”

I said, “Just love. Just love, kuya. We’re on retreat and we have a kindness offering.”

We started giving food to the policemen, and they asked, “Are you part of a campaign?”

“It’s just love, kuya.” So they accepted, because it was just a meal. And after we started to give them this wholeness, they couldn’t say no.

works: That was very good!

Ana: But we didn’t think of it, Richard! It’s just that they were there, and the first feeling was fear. But I remembered how Gandhi did it. He just went through the salt fields. So Anjo and I said, “Let’s stay together and walk.”



works: That’s very wise, really, and instinctive. You have to embrace them and include them. I think you know Pancho [Ramos Stierle]. From a few stories I’ve heard from him, he tries to include the police, and if he can just make a little contact, it can change things.

Ana: And saying, “Thank you.” When they tell us we can’t do something. “Thank you. I know, you’re doing your job and that’s wonderful. We’re on our way out.”

They ask, “Do you have a permit?”

I know the permit is just a symbol of control, so I just say, “We’re leaving, sir—Big Brother. We just wanted to offer kindness.”



Then I ask, “Can we be on the sidewalk?”
“Of course, you can be on the sidewalk.”
So, we go to the sidewalk.

works: You have to give them a role and honor it.

Ana: Honor it, because they’re also making a living.

works: This conversation is full of wonderful things. Is there anything you want to add?

Ana: Yes. What I learned here I cannot describe in words. Something shifted inside, and it’s irreversible. No more “I.” No more “me.” The shift is to *we*, to us, you—one. And silence, a deep silence. And then gratitude, humility, and sacredness.

We’re not vegetarian in the Philippines, and I just learned from Pancho and Ari to respect Mother Earth. I mean, we’re practicing recycling, zero waste, but we’re not vegetarian.

We’ve been vegan here[at ServiceSpace retreat], and I’ve really come to love the Panchos and the Aris [Ari Nessel] and the Audreys [Audrey Lin] and, from their love and their example, I really learned how I’ve fallen short and have been casual about my responsibility to the planet.

So I felt that, and there’s an opportunity to begin embodying that responsibility. Just on our campus we have three thousand students, but I haven’t put my energy there. So, now I want to start practicing. I know there will be a ripple effect. It’s hard to put this into words; it’s something I feel inside. ♦