

Flying high and firing up the night sky

By GERALD FELJANDRO P. RAMOS

MAGNIFICENT, but...

This could best describe the performance of the *Plasticiens Volants* last June 4 at the Quirino Grandstand.

Despite the threat of being drenched, around 5,000 people (mostly local culture-philes, expatriates, and people who just happened to be there) bravely lingered that night to experience a different kind of cultural regalement—and for free.

The show started late, and the anticipation had made the excited crowd grow more feverish, with some balloons already hovering inches above ground. But it was worth the wait.

Up close

Street acts have the notoriety of involving the audience, but little did the Quirino Grandstand audience know how involved they would get with *Plasticiens Volants'* staging of Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (Don Quixote). From out of nowhere, Sancho on four-foot stilts kettle-strung with pots and pans appeared in the thick of the crowd. And at the foot of the extolling words for his master, Don Quixote, wheeled in precariously on

what seemed to be a trapeze bar swinging to and fro. The Manila audience responded with *oooohs* and *aaaahs*.

Don Quixote is the story of a nobleman engrossed in the chivalric tales of the medieval ages. He roamed the La Mancha countryside in search of adventure and monsters. In truth, monsters are everyday things like a collar of balloons and a windmill.

The audience was literally drawn to the play as there was never a time when a performer was more than five feet away from a spectator. Nor was anyone spared from the tiny embers of fireworks exploding like stars above the heads of the audience or a blazing ram charging and weaving through the crowd. Talk about an intimate and interactive theater experience.

Balloons galore

Because of the intense fascination of the *Plasticiens Volants* with balloons and circus acrobatics, one could say that the group has a fetish for anything that floats, flies, and moves on air. The four actors who played Don Quixote were either swinging, careening, somersaulting, or spinning on air. Local fireworks, used to

replace the ones in Tennessee, added new dimension to the traditional treats of lights, sights, and sounds in a theater.

And as a tribute of the French government to Philippine Independence Day, a local military band brassed out familiar tunes much to the delight of everyone.

The extravaganza of the event was something not unlike out of the adventures of Don Quixote. Arches, windmills, towers, and creatures amused everyone by the sheer size and fanciness of their helium-filled forms. The children and the children at heart were all smiles as Don Quixote battled his phantasms.

Even the tragic death of the hero was flung to sublime heights. As his body veiled in white was taken out with a huge spherical balloon painted with symbols of books and his life, a French version of the song "Impossible Dream" resonated through the festive air.

A first

Established in 1976 Paris, *Plasticiens Volants* was formed for an event called "First Professional Street Theater." Since then, they have toured extensively in Europe, Brazil, Quebec, Australia, Israel, and Morocco. According to Michael Collins, the group's administra-

tor, the almost cultic following of *Plasticiens Volants* in the countries they have visited so far is attributed to "the creation of something new, especially with flying objects and fireworks, and fantastic stories."

The Philippine performance was their first and the second leg of their Asian tour. The group had been to Cambodia, and will be going to Taiwan, Singapore, and Thailand.

Over the years, the popularity of street theater has increased. French Embassy Cultural Counselor Marcel Jouve credits the patronage of street theater in France to a tradition of carnival, popularity with the local people, and unflagging support of the government.

The health of the Philippine theater industry may be seen as weak compared to its French counterpart. This, however, does not mean we suffer from theater deficiency. At the very least, our seasonal, and mostly rural traditions of *fiesta*, *Pasyon*, *Pangaluluwa*, and Christmas carols keep us in touch with our thespian prodigiousness which antedates the age of television. What the *Plasticiens Volants* performance did was to bring into sharp relief our need for novelty and tradition. Hopefully, that will bring a world-quality Philippine-first.

