Women trooped to the shows
in their rubber slippers,
carrying babies,
with toddlers clinging
onto the hems of their
worn-out house dresses.
We were bringing theatre
to their doorsteps, as some of the
women watched, perched on
their windows,
still ironing their clothes.

"I don't know where I'm going, but I can't wait till I get
there." A character said that in a movie I saw in the 80s. I
feel too old to be quoting from popular movies but this line
has stuck with me like flytrap paper. Maybe because it is
true. I am often plagued with questions about the uncertain-
ties of my work, my writing and my life in general. But in
spite of that, I anticipate the discovery and seize the exhila-
ration that accompanies the journey.

My work entails a bit of travelling. I can't say I travel a
lot, but when I do I also carry that sense of anticipation.
Anticipating the familiar and the unknown, you reach a
place and the familiar greets you with warmth and comfort,
and the unknown becomes an adventure and a series of
surprise attacks. Strangers welcome you with open arms,
then you learn to embrace the unfamiliar and say "yes" to
what it offers.

There are so many things about my country that I have
yet to know - its diverse landscapes, culture, and languages.
They are the unfamiliar that I want to explore.

Going around the country means travelling by different
means - we have the jeepney, skylab (motorcycle with a
wooden plank to seat other passengers), the tricycle (much
like Thailand's tuk tuk), pedicab (a bicycle attached to a
sidecar for passengers), and the conventional bus, boat and
plane. It can mean eating on the run at the harbour or
tasting the best seafood meal in their area.

I couldn’t forget one of our journeys by sea. We were
enclosed, which I didn’t like, because I prefer to breathe in
the sea breeze. Unfortunately, we were shut in an air-
conditioned speedboat, the raging sea striking its mighty waves at
us. We were in for a two-hour roller-coaster ride on water.
The dizzying ride felt as if it would never end. When it
finally did, I thought about why we had to endure some-
thing like that, and for what?

So when I recently went to the Visayas, a major group of
islands in the midsection of the Philippines, I prepared
myself for boat rides. I was there to observe the audience's
feedback on the play I wrote which our theatre group was touring.

Our theatre group, PETA (Philippine Educational Theater Association), has been touring, bringing *Libby Manaoag Files* to different parts of the country. Libby Manaoag (pronounced Ma-na-wag) is a fictitious character who is on the trail of missing chopped-up female body parts. The play is actually a bizarre comic take on husbands and wives, health care for mothers with many kids, single mums, experimenting teens, women with AIDS, and how government and society take care of them, neglect them or ostracise them. Being in a nation steeped in Catholic dogma, reproductive rights is a controversial topic to brandish about.

When we went to Ormoc, a province in the Visayas, we were constantly reminded of the invisible war between the church and promoters of women's rights. The people from the local media told us that some of the religious people refused to support the show because they thought it would promote abortion or artificial birth control. I am quite familiar with the word war, but I was not familiar with the people of Ormoc, so I anticipated the best and the worst reaction from them.

I hardly had any idea about Ormoc except for the great flash flood that hit its city in the early 90s, leaving 8,000 dead and missing. They said that when the flood subsided, the city streets were literally so cluttered with corpses that people had to walk on them - eerie and tragic. Before I went there I also saw a television documentary on the Ormoc child workers. Children still in their third grade carry the heavy task of cutting the sharp leaves in the sugar plantation. I thought, how scarred these people might be, and yet I thought that their spirit for survival must be so strong.

Now the city doesn't seem to show evidence of the tragedy. Bridges were built, trees were replanted, buildings were constructed. But by chance I saw a truckload of people who came to the town centre to bathe in the sea. They were sugar workers, and some were in their early teens, perhaps
younger, aged by hard work. I invited them
to the show, but they had to get back to the
fields. Life is hard. I couldn’t comprehend
the other things they said, and I wished I
knew more of their language! Still, I felt a
brief moment of warm exchange through
smiles, gestures and the little I know of their
mother tongue.

At the main road in Ormoc, I could see
this common vehicle which would pass as a
jeepney, but which they called the multi-cab.
Painted on the multi-cabs are points of desti-
nation - Bliss, Bagong Buhay (New Life),
Puertobella (Beautiful Port). It is like wish
fulfilment. You go to a place which you hope
lives up to its name.

In 1999, when we were on tour with
Tumawag Kay Libby Manaog (Call Libby
Manaog), a play which used the same char-
acter to weave stories of women caught in
domestic violence, we went to a place in
Malabon called Paradise Village. We were
greeted by wet and narrow streets, and the
smell of fish sauce, Malabon's major enter-
prise. We performed at an open-air multi-
purpose community plaza more often used
for basketball games, dance parties and street
fights. Our director, Maribel Legarda, noted
that our would-be stage was small, "perhaps
four tombstones combined". Quite ominous,
considering that women would tell us, "My
husband and I vowed to be together 'till
death do us part'. But I didn't think it meant
being battered to death." I pondered on the
meaning of paradise for these people.

Women trooped to the shows in their
rubber slippers, carrying babies, with toddlers
cling onto the hems of their worn-out
house dresses. We were bringing theatre to
their doorsteps, as some of the women
watched, perched on their windows, still
ironing their clothes.

I was acting in the play then and because
our backstage was just a metre away from
the audience, I could hear the women in the
audience exclaiming, "Fetch the others!
They should see this!" A combination of
nervous laughter and sisterly banter perme-
ated the air when the scenes about the
battered wife were shown.

But this year we are touring a play which
may not be as well-accepted as the previous
one which tackled violence against women,
something that everyone thinks must be
stopped. But women making choices about
their bodies? I could hear myself breathing
nervous laughter just before the open forum,
where the nuns were present.

After every show, we would have an
open forum or debriefing workshop. We
would ask the audience to stay and give
comments, raise some issues to discuss with
us and among themselves.

During the open forum in Ormoc, a
woman found the courage to ask if contra-
ception was the right way of planning one's
family. A man blocked her from pursuing the
topic, noting the presence of nuns in the
forum. After a brief debate about whether
they should talk about this or not, one of the
nuns stood up and addressed another
concern which had been causing anxiety for
some of us. The nun said that while she was
watching the play, she did not even think if
it was 'pro-life', "pro-choice" or what. She
said that the performance opened the minds
of the audience who are left to decide for
themselves. Now, that felt like a warm
embrace from a stranger. "Yes!" I told myself,
cheering for this liberal-minded nun and
everyone who dared talk out loud about
what was usually said in whispers.

I was pleasantly surprised by the
extended discussion that happened the next
day, when we came from an excursion in
Lake Danao, Ormoc. It was raining hard and
we huddled up close and squeezed to fit in
the multi-cab. We passed by a public school
where teachers and students were walking
on their way home. The driver stopped and
let some of the teachers ride with us. With no seats available in the multi-cab, the teachers sat on each other's laps. We did the same thing. The fun part was when they found out that we were from PETA. The young teachers started talking about the play, which in turn made them talk about the restrictions they felt as women while they were still students. There was instant camaraderie as stories were exchanged. They talked about the strict nuns who reprimanded the students who wore black brassieres, as these were deemed seductive. I was aghast at the story about the college administrators who required students to take pregnancy tests before they could graduate.

The way they talked was as if they were finally divulging something that had been stifled for a long time. There was something powerful about it - like a weapon to place shame on those who did not respect their rights. I soon realised that it was not just PETA who brought them a play, but they, too, were giving us so much about themselves which we took with us when we went back home.

Some of these "take-outs" left an indelible mark in our memories. In one workshop, a woman complained to us about her husband who used to beat her black and blue. Exasperated, she finally told him: "You like going out even if you have nothing in your pocket. I don't eat anything but salt, and still you have the gall to hit me! If I could only pawn your manhood!" Eventually, the lines found their way in our play. (Unfortunately so much is lost in the translation!)

It is surprising how minds speak; how women jump out of enclosed spaces to stretch the limits that box them in. Their words surprised me as unknown deeds accumulated to become frighteningly familiar. Despite the differences in landscape, language and culture, women collectively share a narrative about their lives.

But the uncommon brought us a sense of hope. Enlightened men talked during these workshops and confessed that they were once insensitive to their wives' burden. One of them even said, "We should help them when they do their laundry" (generally, laundry is done manually and mostly by women). "Laundry work causes a lot of back pain!" the man added. We met more of these men in our recent tour. We also met more women and men who are willing to work together to protect women's rights.

In a way, I am glad we are part of the process of making these people examine their lives and talk among themselves. For once they do, solutions are not far behind. Sometimes talk can just go on, and you don't know where it is going. But while we can't wait to get there, we can only hope that the destination - the real Bliss, Bagong Buhay, Puertobella, or Paradise Village - is something better. That the journey from here to there, despite the dizzying ride, is worth the taking.

LIZA C. MAGTOTO (The Philippines) was born in Pasay City in 1961. She is a playwright, freelance script writer, publication designer, workshop facilitator and theatre artist. She works with the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA). In 1999 she received the second place in the Carlos Palanca Foundation Memorial Award for Literature for her play Despedida de Soltera. In 1998-1999 she performed in Tumawag Kay Libby Manaoag, a touring production about violence against women.