Probably the most vulnerable of all the intangible cultural heritage domains, the performing arts is exposed to public view, continual assaults of innovation and creativity, individual interpretations, sociological contextual adaptation and other influences.

In early Philippines, it is difficult to draw a distinguishing line between oral traditions and expressions, and the performing arts, per se. Traditionally, the two are one and the same. It is only later in history, with the advent of Western culture, that performing arts began to emerge as an integral entity when the performer assumed a status apart from the usually participant audience.
LATER FORMS of this street play did not draw from actual Christian-Moro conflicts but from awit and corrido, verse romances inspired by European stories of chivalry, which were also popular then. The Christians were usually kings, queens, princes, princesses, dukes and others (dressed soberly in dark blue, less spangled with epaulets designating rank, wearing plumed hats) while the Moros were caliphs, viziers, generals, princes and princesses (dressed with bright colors, in red or maroon capes, topped by headdresses). They strode the stage to the tune of marches or pasa-dobles, flourishing capes and brandishing swords in a rigodon of battles or romantic conflicts: Moro prince with Christian princess and vice versa, with conflict resolved finally with the conversion of the Muslim, or death, or through miraculous resurrection through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary or a saint.

The comedia usually opens with a loa or prologue, followed by the parada, a procession of the characters in colorful costumes that distinguishes the Christians from the Moros. The main performances begin with a boastful Muslim embahado delivering a challenge to an equally boastful Christian leader (with the characters being fed their lines by a prompter in a box or right in the vicinity of the stage where the band sits), their lines in octosyllabic or duo decasyllabic quatrains.

A stylized battle ensues, choreographed to martial music. There are love scenes and other thrills thrown in, as well as magic effects, spectacles and comic relief. The form became popular in the rural areas because the folks wanted entertainment and escape. The comedia delivered as it is full of battle, romance, fantasy and visual spectacle. As it is usually part of a celebration of a saint's feast, it also incorporates religious values, including the inevitable triumph of Christianity against all odds. But the comedia continually develops and changes with the times. Performances may last from one to a number of days.

THIS IS A SPANISH lyric-dramatic genre that alternates between spoken and sung scenes. Introduced in the Philippines in the 19th century (1878), it places great importance on music. Initially, zarzuelas were presented by professionals from Spain. Later, locals took over as when Ateneo de Manila presented the zarzuela, Junto del Pasig, written in verse by Jose Rizal, with music by Blas Echegoyen (1880). Later, native languages began to be used. After the Spanish rule, the Americans took over and gave rise to a new theatre form, incorporating the humor from the moro-moro and the abandon of the Spanish zarzuela.

The early Filipino zarzuela had moro-moro themes with encounters between Filipinos and Spaniards, or Filipinos and Americans with the Filipinos coming out on top. If the moro-moro was aimed at conversion, the zarzuela was a propaganda against foreign rule – hence the development of the form in native dialects. Literary and dramatic values were hardly present in the early forms and were more of propaganda to stimulate nationalism. This resulted to the arrests of librettists and theatre owners due to the revolutionary overtones.

The zarzuela evolved into a kind of comedy of manners: elaborate theatrical and musical displays became popular, leading to the demand for composers, conductors, singers and members of orchestras. After 1920, with the advent of cinema, the form began to be relegated to the provinces. There are attempts at revival at revival in Manila (e.g. Walang Sugat), and it remains the Philippine version of the Italian Opera, Japan's Kabuki and other similar forms.