

## PHILIPPINE FILM: 1897-1960

Like other foreign art forms transplanted to the Philippines from the West, film adapted to the tastes of a Westernized though still Asiatic temperament; its conventions and genres were reshaped to express the deep-seated aspirations and dreams of a developing nation. Since its beginnings in the early 1900s, film has fascinated Filipinos, its audiences growing larger, and more appreciative and enthusiastic through the years. When the theater network and the studio system were finally in place, it easily became the most popular medium. Its stars were the arbiters of fashion; its stories were the thoughts and dreams of a country. Its influence was felt not only in culture but also in politics, business, and in the development of a national language.

### The Early Films

Motion pictures were introduced in Europe as early as 1877; but it was only in 1895 that film projection became a reality in the Philippines. In that year, Manila had its first electric plant installed with the help of Japanese technicians. The new energy source prompted astute entrepreneurs to import electrical gadgets. In 1896 La Estrella del Norte ordered from France a 60 millimeters Gaumont Chronophotographe with sound amplifiers for a businessman, a Señor Pertierra. Pertierra presented a program which was billed as the *Espetaculo Cientifico de Pertierra* (Pertierra's Scientific Show) on 8 January 1897 in his salon at No. 12 Escolta. However, this turned out to be merely a presentation of stills and chronophotographs.

The first real cinematograph was brought in by two Swiss entrepreneurs, Leibman and Peritz. On 18 September 1897 they introduced the Lumiere cinematograph along with several Lumiere films. Music was provided by a quintet under the direction of Professor Francisco P. de Barbat. As in Pertierra's salon, ticket prices were steep with first-class seats selling at two pesos and second class at one peso. Only the Spaniards and their wealthy native friends could afford admission—although *indios* were permitted to buy second-class tickets.

Reactions to the films were varied, ranging from awe to consternation, but generally audiences were enthralled by the new invention's ability to record reality. However, because of the Spanish-American War and the absence of a distribution network, the movie business did not flourish.

Another exhibitor was Antonio Ramos, a Spanish officer from Barcelona. In 1898 he showed his collection of films to Manila audiences. When he ran out of titles, he decided to shoot Manila street scenes of less than a minute each: *Escenas Callejeras* (Street Scenes), *Fiesta de Quiapo* (Quiapo Fiesta), and *Panorama de Manila* (Manila Panorama). He was the first to shoot moving pictures in the Philippines.

In the same year, when the Americans sailed into Manila Bay, Admiral Dewey

brought along a cameraman to record daily life in a country that was to become an American colony. The films still exist in the Library of Congress.

In 1905, a visiting cameraman of the Edison Biograph, Herbert Wyndham, shot a series of scenes at the Manila Fire Department. The shot showed the mayor of Manila, Mr. Brown, turning on a fire alarm and the firetrucks responding to the call. Shots of the Tanduay station showed in detail how firemen prepare for a fire. This was the first edited film made in the Philippines.

However, movies did not prosper until 1909. Except for a brief period in 1905, screenings were too few and far between. If any new films arrived, these were usually shown as the *entr'acte* in vaudeville shows or as carnival sideshows.

At around this time, traveling cinematographs with small electric motors were introduced. Tents were set up similar to those used by circuses while barkers coaxed largely skeptical provincial crowds to watch the show. At that time, since media advertisements were still unknown, publicity was solely the task of these so-called ballyhoo people.

In 1909 a theater network was put in place. With a distribution company based in Singapore, the Pathe Freres supplied films and projectors. There was competition among entrepreneurs to open the first moviehouse in the Philippines after a lull of many years. Albert Yearsley converted the Orpheum, a pioneer vaudeville house, into the Empire, the first in his theater network. No sooner had he announced its opening than Goullete and Teaque inaugurated the Anda Theater. The Teatro Zorrilla and the Manila Grand Opera House were also outfitted with projectors and, for a time, were operated as moviehouses.

With a distribution network in place, the next step was the production of local features. Before 1909 only visiting filmmakers shot in the Philippines.

Albert Yearsley became the first resident to shoot local films. On 30 December 1909, he shot the Rizal Day celebration at the Luneta which was shown in April of the following year. This was followed by shots of the Manila Carnival of 1910; the eruption of Taal Volcano in 1911; the first airplane flight over Manila by flyer Bud Mars during the Manila Carnival of 1911; the Tondo, Pandacan, and Paco fires of 1911; the trip of the Igorots to Barcelona; and the Cebu typhoon of 1912.

### **The Silent Features**

In 1912 there was yet another race to film the first feature. Producer Harry Brown, cinematographer Charles Martin, and scenarist Edward Gross organized the Rizalina Photoplay Company and produced *La vida de Jose Rizal* (The Life of Jose Rizal), a film 5,000 feet in length and with 22 scenes. It begins with a view of the Philippines prior to Rizal's birth and traces his career in Europe, his exile in Dapitan, his

imprisonment in Fort Santiago and his martyrdom at Bagumbayan. The film, based on Edward Gross' 1905 stage play, starred his wife, Titay Molina, as Maria Clara; the famous actor, Chananay, as Rizal's mother; and Honorio Lopez, the Tagalog writer, as Jose Rizal.

But just as announcements for its opening were splashed all over the newspapers, Albert Yearsley took Severino Reyes' Gran Compañia de la Zarzuela Tagala to the Cementerio del Norte and shot ***El fusilamiento de Dr. Jose Rizal*** (The Shooting of Dr. Jose Rizal). Consisting of only one scene of 500 feet and shot in one day, the film was shown on 22 August 1912, a day ahead of its rival feature.

Both films did well at the box-office. The two film companies were encouraged to produce other features. Nationalism was at fever pitch during this period. Events of the previous decade such as the expulsion of the Spaniards, the ratification of the Malolos Constitution, the Philippine-American War and the massacres of Filipinos were still fresh in the people's minds. The filmmakers, despite being Americans, cashed in on the prevailing sentiments of the native population and produced films with historical themes. Unfortunately, their efforts met with resistance from the censors.

Gross, Brown, and Martin shot ***Los Tres Martires*** (The Three Martyrs) in 1912, a film on the martyr priests, Gomez, Burgos, and Zamora. The censors excised the execution scene on the grounds that it might foment unrest in the Spanish community. Similarly, Albert Yearsley's film of the *sarswela*, ***Walang Sugat*** (Not Wounded), 1912, was withdrawn after 11 days of screening. Another Gross, Brown, and Martin film, ***La Conquista de Filipinas de Legazpi*** (The Conquest of the Philippines by Legazpi), 1913, had luck; it passed the censors despite the dissenting vote of a Captain Scott who objected to the violence.

In 1915, Edward Gross realized his life-long dream of filming the two Rizal novels—***Noli Me Tangere*** (Touch Me Not), 1915, and ***El Filibusterismo*** (Subversion), 1916, budgeted at 25,000 pesos, a huge sum in those days. Both films ran for over two hours, with ***Fili*** composed of two parts. Again Gross' wife, Titay Molina, starred as Maria Clara; in part two of the ***Fili***, she appeared at every screening and sang the "Ave Maria" to the accompaniment of a harp.

Luis Camas, owner of Sirena Theater, formed the Sirena Moving Company in 1915. He shot newsreels like ***Bullfight in Manila***, 1915; ***Burial of Hon. Benito Legarda***, 1916; and ***The Opening of La Casa de España***, 1917. He experimented with mixing film and live performances. ***The Apache Waltz***, 1917, started with film clips of Manila streets and ended with the Pons quartet on the stage of the theater. Two other such experiments were ***Urgent Telegram***, 1917, and ***La Purga de Suarez***, 1917.

Non-historical films finally made their bow in 1916. Gross produced ***Nena la Boxeadora*** (Nena the Boxer) with Maria Tronqued in the title role. The plot revolves around Nena de la Cruz, a champion athlete, who borrows money from the town usurer

when her father gets sick. In case of failure to pay, she pledges her services as a servant. As the debt becomes due, Nena, in desperation, accepts the offer of a boxing match with a Manila champion prizefighter. As an added feature, Gross shot a short on the life of *Enchong Laway*, the famous spit doctor of Parañaque.

Gross' perennial rival, Albert Yearsley, focused his cinematic efforts on sensational events in the country. In 1914 he shot the trial of noted criminal Eusebio Borja, who was convicted of murder and theft. Yearsley's filming, however, provoked an outcry from the newspapers and the movie was never shown.

The American colonizers found film to be a lucrative investment. Their objective was to make as much money in the islands and then go home. The first features had historical themes—movies that would be considered inimical to any colonial government but sensational in the box-office. Despite its success, the first wave of filmmaking soon collapsed as the American filmmakers returned to the United States.

By the time the United States entered World War I in 1917, the traumas of the Philippine-American War had run their course. Filipinos began to assert themselves in the political, cultural, and economic spheres and learned the language and art forms of their colonizers. With the American entrepreneurs returning to their home country, the time was ripe for local talent to make its mark.

### **The First Filipino-made Films**

The first Filipino to try his hand at filmmaking was Jose Nepomuceno, owner of a popular photo-studio, the Electro-Parnelio. He bought the equipment of the Rizalina Film Company and first busied himself as a news cameraman, shooting the funeral of Doña Estefania Velasco vda. de Osmeña, the first wife of President Sergio Osmeña, a series on Filipino industries and the Filipino reaction to Woodrow Wilson's victory in the American presidential elections.

In 1919 he directed ***Dalagang Bukid*** (Country Maiden), a film version of the sarswela of Hermogenes Ilagan and Leon Ignacio. It starred Atang de la Rama, who, following Titay Molina's example, sang the songs live on the theater stage. The film, which was shot in two parts—the second part was entitled ***La Venganza de Don Silvestre*** (The Vengeance of Don Silvestre)—and shown a month apart, is about a barrio maid who is forced by her parents to marry a rich old man, but she outwits the old man by eloping with her boyfriend, a law student. Nepomuceno also directed ***Hoy o Nunca Besame*** (Kiss me Now or Never), 1920, and ***Un Capullo Marchito*** (A Withered Bud), 1920. In 1921 a fire swept his studio and he was forced to sell his equipment.

Nepomuceno was not the only Filipino drawn to the craft of filmmaking. The attempts of a few made it plain that Filipinos still had a lot of learning to do. Faustino Lichauco started ***Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*** but had to stop halfway through the shooting; Claudio Briones and Ricardo Marcelino quarreled on the set of ***Piping Saksi***

(Mute Witness) and the film was shelved.

From 1919 to 1921, two events served to publicize the magic of film and entice more Filipinos to the craft. In 1919, Universal Studios filmed episodes of a Hollywood movie in Intramuros, Parañaque, and Pagsanjan. The shooting of *The 7th Petal of Lao-Tze*, an episode in *The Dragon's Net*, directed by Henry McRae with a top Hollywood star, Marie Walcamp, drew crowds everywhere. In 1922 Elena Jurado came home after appearing in two Hollywood films— *White Hands* with Hobart Bosworth and *Four Flushers*. Along with her producers, she was feted by many civic organizations and media groups including *The Philippines Herald*. Plans to shoot a number of films in the Philippines were announced but these never materialized.

By the 1920s film had woven its magic on the masses and became the most popular art form. Hollywood beckoned. Ricardo Marcelino, Vicente Salumbides, Eduardo de Castro, Salvador Tinsay, Cecilio Joaquin, Richard Abelardo, and Nick Osmeña either traveled as regular passengers or worked as ship musicians or janitors in order to get to Hollywood. They returned years later to make their mark in Philippine cinema.

In 1926, fresh from Hollywood, Vicente Salumbides revived Filipino filmmaking with *Miracles of Love*, starring Hermogenes Ilagan, Dimples Cooper, and the director himself. Jose Nepomuceno was his cameraman and labman. For the first time in Philippine cinema, closeups, fast-cutting and Hollywood-style makeup were used. Stream-of-consciousness techniques also made their appearance—a person's thoughts were visualized, something altogether new in those days.

The film *Miracles of Love* tells the story of a doctor who falls in love with the heroine's picture in a magazine. He enters the service of her family as a servant. The heroine is being forced to marry a rich old man and confides her problems to the servant-doctor, who expresses his love for her. They decide to elope and the family gives chase. Everything turns out well when the hero's true identity is revealed.

Encouraged by the success of *Miracles of Love*, Jose Nepomuceno directed two films— *Ang Tatlong Hambog* (The Three Braggarts), 1926, and *The Miracles of Our Lady of Antipolo*, 1926. By 1930, he was producing five films a year, more than half the output of local silent cinema. A rich source of Jose Nepomuceno's movies was vernacular novels whose themes delved into Filipino values and problems. In *Nanay Ko* (My Mother), 1929, a child is oppressed by a cruel stepmother. In *Sa Landas ng Pag-ibig* (The Path of Love), 1929, a woman chooses between a life of wealth gained through corruption and a poor, simple life with an honest man. In *Ligaw na Bulaklak* (Wild Flower), 1932, an orphan of unknown parentage tries to assert herself amidst the hypocrisies of the times. This proved to be so popular that a sequel followed, *Lantang Bulaklak* (Withered Flower), 1932, the story of the disgraced mother.

Jose Nepomuceno also produced spectacles in the manner of Cecil B. De Mille. One of these was *Moro Pirates*, 1931, which featured vinta racing against the wind and

clashes between Muslims and Christians. He also directed horror movies using Christian symbols and native folklore as in *Tiyanak* (Changeling), 1932, and *Mang Tano: Nuno ng mga Aswang* (Old Man Tano: Ancestor of Vampires), 1932, as well as films with nationalist themes like *Daughters of the Revolution*, 1931.

Despite a cautious start a decade earlier, Philippine cinema was hitting its stride. Seven films were made in 1929; nine in 1930; nine in 1931; and 25 in 1932, the last year of the silents. The sudden increase may be explained by several factors. Jose Nepomuceno had by this time recovered his losses from the fires that struck his studio and with the help of stockholder-friends, was producing a film almost every two months. Filipinos who had left to visit or work in Hollywood were returning home and setting up film companies. In addition, Americans who were trying to escape the severe depression in the United States came to the Philippines to seek their fortune in filmmaking.

Filmmakers other than Salumbides and Nepomuceno started to appear in 1929. Julian Manansala directed *Patria Amore* (Beloved Country), 1929, and Arthur Matthews, the first filmization of Severino Reyes' popular sarswela *Minda Mora*, 1929. In 1930, Manuel Silos and Carlos Vander Tolosa made their debuts, followed by Ernesto Lopez in 1931; Salvador Tinsay, Eduardo de Castro, and Agapito Conchu in 1932; and Brigida Perez Villanueva, the first woman filmmaker, in 1933.

Also during this time, the star system became more apparent. A newspaper article noted that audiences were beginning to relate to a small group of actors, a trend that culminated in a phenomenon where an actor could singlehandedly determine the box-office success or failure of a movie. Among the first stars of Philippine cinema were Mary Walter, Naty Femandez, Gregorio Fernandez, Maggie Calloway, and Nora Linda.

Abandoned by the Americans, film production during these years was taken over by Filipinos. However, they did not have the technical sophistication to compete with foreign productions. Several Filipinos went to Hollywood to learn the craft. After a number of fits and starts, silent filmmaking became an industry in the late 1920s. A firmament of stars became recognized. However, this phase would soon be overtaken by a major event—the advent of sound.

### **The Talkies**

Sound, or what passed for it took Manila by storm in the late 1920s. Ironically, the advent of sound was also silent cinema's most fecund period.

On 3 August 1929, Radio Theater presented the first talkie, Fred Waring's *Pennsylvanian Syncopation*. This was achieved by synchronizing phonograph records with the film. The sound was faint and muffled in parts. As expected, the audience complained. The real thing, however, was not long in coming. On 12 October 1929, Leon Britton, a British engineer, arrived in Manila with 35 cases of equipment and 35,000 feet of film. The next day, he presented a program of optically recorded sound films at the Lyric Theater—*Rainbow Man*, *Steamboat Bill*, *The Marionettes at the Opera*, and *A Trip to the London Zoo*. Talkie fever gripped Manila at once, thanks

to Britton and his films.

Filipino films dubbed live behind the screen by stage actors were advertised as talkies. The price of sound equipment was prohibitive by Filipino standards; it would take a few more years to import and master the technology. Despite these limitations, however, Filipino cinema took off and became the country's most popular entertainment.

On 4 March 1930, Carlos Vander Tolosa came out with his first film, *Collegian Love*, the first Filipino film to be synchronized with phonograph records. It proved to be immensely popular. By then, the competition to produce the first optically-recorded talkie was underway.

Two years after Tolosa's debut film, filmmakers were still struggling with the new technology. Jose Nepomuceno advertised his film *Sa Pinto ng Langit* (At Heaven's Gate), 1932, as the first talkie, but this turned out to be mere publicity hype. Then, visiting Hollywood director Arthur Thompson announced that he was shooting a sound film with Virginia Spencer, cousin of Hollywood star Belle Bennett. A Filipino-American, Jessie Matthews, who worked with Cecil B. De Mille in Hollywood, set up Paragon Pictures. However, Matthews only got to finish his sound film *Dinukot* (Kidnapped) in 1934.

The first film made in the Philippines to feature optically-recorded sound was George Musser's *Ang Aswang* (The Vampire). In 1932, Musser imported P50,000 worth of optical sound equipment and turned his house into a studio, with Charles Miller as his cinematographer and William Smith as his sound technician. He spent a year shooting *Ang Aswang*, which, despite its Tagalog title, was actually a film in Spanish and English. The film finally opened to great acclaim at the Lyric Theater on 1 January 1933. Unfortunately, its sound was sometimes out of sync and inaudible.

In the same year, two Americans, George Harris and Eddie Tait, embarked on a plan to make Manila the film capital of Asia. Using Manila as their base, they would produce films not only for the Philippines but also for Indonesia, Malaysia, and China. Their initial venture, a partnership with Jose Nepomuceno, attached soundtracks to Nepomuceno's half-finished films: *Punyal na Ginto* (Golden Dagger), *Makata at Paraluman* (The Poet and the Muse), *Dr. Kuba* (Dr. Hunchback), and *Children of the Philippines*, 1933. To help with sound technology, they engaged the services of Leon Britton, the British engineer, who returned to Manila with three technicians—Jack Smith, Louis Morse, and John Lund.

Encouraged by the response of the market, Eddie Tait and George Harris set up their own company, Filippine Films. The duo's vision was grand. Using Hollywood studios as their model, they put up separate departments for each filmmaking stage or operation, set a quota of films to be produced each year, and with the help of Frank Capra brought in a new batch of technicians.

The company's first film *Ang Mga Ulila* (The Orphans), 1933, about a family shipwrecked in Mindoro, is a take-off on *King Kong*. It was advertised as having pythons and gorillas, parachute jumps, and other thrills. Their second venture, *Mag-inang Mahirap* (Destitute Mother and Child), 1934, employed local talents, including director Manuel Silos who made his sound film debut.

All in all, the transition to sound was shaky. Foreign films had optical soundtracks and were drawing away audiences from local cinema. Live dubbing and phonograph records were resorted to but these were considered inadequate. Finally, two American businessmen brought in the sophisticated technology at considerable expense.

## The Studios

On 20 November 1933, Harris and Tait invited high government officials to the inauguration of the first sound stage. This was the beginning of the studio system in the Philippines. The pair was responsible for other firsts in Philippine cinema. In 1935 they started the first color laboratory with Paul Perry as supervisor. However, the facility was limited to the production of shorts and news features. Also, in the same year, in collaboration with DMHM Radio, they started the first newsreel service.

Harris and Tait's ultimate goal, however, was the world market. In 1936 they started the production of a film they hoped would give them a foothold in that market. *Zamboanga* was shown all over the United States before its Manila run in 1937. While it achieved a measure of success, no plans were made for a followup. Three years later, Harris and Tait sold their interests to Filipino entrepreneur J. Amado Araneta. George Harris died in a car accident in 1940.

The success of Philippine Films encouraged Filipino filmmakers and businessmen to compete with Harris and Tait. Jose Nepomuceno reorganized Malayan Pictures Corporation into Parlatone Hispano-Filipino in 1935. Its first film, *Diwata ng Karagatan* (Goddess of the Sea), touted as having been edited in Paris, was shown the following year. But trouble was brewing in Parlatone. Before the year was over, Nepomuceno was ousted by Raymundo Navarro in a bitter stockholders' battle.

Sampaguita Pictures, now the country's oldest existing studio, was formed in 1937 by Congressman Pedro Vera, with prodding from Luis Nolasco. Its first film, *Bituing Marikit* (Beautiful Star), was a huge success. It also marked the beginning of one of the most fruitful artistic collaborations ever seen in local movies, among scenarist Luis Nolasco, director Carlos Vander Tolosa, and musician Mike Velarde. The triumvirate created the most memorable musicales before the war: *Nasaan Ka Irog?* (Where Are You, My Love?), 1937, *Madaling-Araw* (Dawn), 1938, and *Serenata sa Nayon* (Country Serenade), 1941.

Excelsior Pictures, considered the most modern studio at the time, was founded by Don Ramon Araneta in 1938. Its two sound stages had double walling and its equipment



was highly sophisticated. Its first film, *Ang Maya* (The Sparrow), 1938, featured gems from the opera and was directed by Jose Nepomuceno.

LVN, another major studio, was formed by three friends—Doña Narcisa “Sisang” de Leon, Carmen Villongco, and Eleuterio Navoa, whose initials made up the name of the company. Its first film, *Giliw Ko* (My Love), 1939, directed by Carlos Vander Tolosa, was a box-office hit. Unfortunately, its succeeding films did not do so well at the box-office and Doña Sisang had to buy out the other stockholders.

Jose Nepomuceno, after his ouster from Parlatone in 1936, resurfaced with X-Otic Films in 1939 with co-founders Jesus Cacho and Julian Salgado. X-Otic’s first production, *Punit na Bandila* (Torn Flag), 1939, was a drama on the Revolution of 1896 directed by Jose Nepomuceno. After the Pacific War, the firm was reorganized into Movietec. Some of its stockholders later joined forces with Rafael Anton and formed Lebran Films. Other studios that were established during this period were Cervantina Filipina Corporation, Del Monte Pictures, Waling-Waling Pictures, and Acuña-Zaldarriaga Productions.

Moviemaking proved to be a lucrative investment for cash-rich Filipinos. According to one executive, capitalization of P10,000 brought in P50,000 at the very least. The high return on investment lured more and more of Manila’s elite into the new medium. Right before the outbreak of World War II in the country in 1941, the Philippine film industry was producing more than 60 films a year.

It was one of the great periods of Philippine cinema, with musicals, melodramas, horror movies, South Sea dramas, and films with a nationalist slant finding favor with the moviegoing public. The most outstanding, however, were movies on agrarian problems, folk narratives, revolutionary drama, and sarswela. Two contemporary romances were the period’s most successful films—Gregorio Fernandez’s *Señorita* (Young Mistress), 1940, and Gerardo de Leon’s *Ang Maestra* (The Teacher), 1941.

It was also during this period that a new breed of directors who were to dominate the postwar era made their film debuts. Former silent-screen star Gregorio Fernandez launched his directorial career with *Asahar at Kabaong* (Bridal Garland and Casket) in 1937, Ramon Estella with *Bayan at Pag-ibig* (Love and Country) and Gerardo de Leon with *Bahay Kubo* (Nipa Hut) in 1938, Lamberto Avellana with *Sakay* in 1939, and Manuel Conde with *Sawing Gantimpala* (Lost Reward), 1940.

Movie stars, too, became fixed in the firmament. With their drawing power, they became major players in the industry. Rosa del Rosario, Carmen Rosales, Elsa Oria, Lucita Goyena, Rosario Moreno, Mila del Sol, Rogelio de la Rosa, Leopoldo Salcedo, Jose Padilla Jr., Angel Esmeralda, Fernando Poe, and Rudy Concepcion were the period’s top stars, commanding not only their studios’ solicitousness but also the public’s adulation and patronage.

In this era, Filipino films had become immensely popular with the moneyed class who

invested heavily in the industry. There were several studios that sprang up just before the war. Over 50 films were produced each year, making the film industry one of the most prodigious, considering the small population then. A local film culture was developing which later would extend its reach into other fields.

## **The War Years**

The Pacific War, as historians call that period of the global conflict which pitted Japan against the United States in Asia, initially proved to be a minor distraction to the film industry. The bombs fell on Manila on 8 December 1941. Manila was declared an open city a few days before the end of that year. Bataan fell in April 1942, Corregidor early in the following month. But the movie industry continued to flourish until raw stock disappeared from the shelves. Films that were in production were ultimately finished and screened during the war. When the raw stock was used up, moviemakers moved on to stage productions. Thus began an important period in the development of Philippine theater.

The Japanese Occupation introduced a new player to the industry—the Japanese; and a new role for film—propaganda. In 1944, the newcomers established Eiga Heikusa, a distribution and production company, which with the help of Toho Film Company filmed ***The Dawn of Freedom***, 1944, with Abe Yutaka as director and Gerardo de Leon as associate director. In the lead roles were Fernando Poe and Leopoldo Salcedo. The movie focused on the oppressiveness of the Americans and the new friendship between the Filipinos and the Japanese.

In the same year, Jose Esperanza Cruz's novel, ***Tatlong Maria*** (Three Marys), 1944, was adapted by Tsutomu Sawamura for the screen and directed by Gerardo de Leon. The movie, which starred Carmen Rosales, Norma Blancaflor, and Liwayway Arceo, extolled the virtues of country living and featured grand musical numbers staged at the Manila Hotel and the Jai Alai.

The film industry, though one of the first to rise from the ruins of war, was not impervious to its effects. On 4 March 1946, LVN presented the first postwar film, Manuel Conde's ***Orasang Ginto*** (The Golden Clock), which delved into the sufferings and heroism of the Filipino guerrilla. A marked change of mood had descended on the industry. Gentle innocence and coyness gave way to hardboiled realism. Criminality and violence became the more pronounced themes.

Over the next 10 years, the theme of the returning guerrilla and his difficulties in adjusting to a normal life in the mainstream of society dominated Filipino movies. Euphoria marked the first year following the end of the war. The end of hostilities was celebrated in Manuel Silos' ***Victory Joe***, 1946, as it lightheartedly looked at Filipinas embracing American GIs as conquering heroes. Gerardo de Leon's ***So Long, America***, 1946, bade farewell to the American-sponsored Commonwealth and welcomed the new Republic.

But euphoria soon turned into disillusionment as political corruption and social strife demolished the gains of liberation. In the movie *Backpay*, 1947, disgruntled guerrillas talk of joining the Communist Hukbalahap movement because of government failure to implement agrarian reforms and the nonpayment of their war benefits. In *Lupang Pangako* (Promised Land), 1949, and *Mga Busabos ng Palad* (The Slaves of Destiny), 1948, guerrillas find themselves jobless and are forced to either beg or steal. In *Palaboy ng Tadhana* (The Tramp of Fate), 1947, a guerrilla pawns his medal so he could buy lunch for himself and a street urchin.

With the advent of the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the posture of heroism amidst destitution became more pronounced. In Lamberto Avellana's award-winning *Anak Dalita* (The Ruins), 1956, a bemedalled Korean war veteran ends up in the slums and engages in currency smuggling as a means of livelihood.

In sum, Filipino filmmaking ground to a halt, but only for a brief while. Propaganda films were produced. Filipino film talent flowered on the Philippine stage. Some studios were razed to the ground and a large portion of our film heritage was lost forever. However, the film industry was one of the first to rise from the ashes of war. It lost the innocence of the prewar years and was particularly enamoured with the war exploits of its soldiers and their adjustment problems. By the end of the 1960s, the Filipino film had a rich diversity of themes and genres.

### **The Popular Genres**

In the 1950s three studios emerged as the country's top filmmakers and starbuilders: Sampaguita, LVN, and Premiere. The trio accounted for two-thirds of the films made, which passed the hundredth mark in 1958. They had their own stable of stars, directors, script writers, and technicians, all on exclusive contracts. Studio bosses looked over the day's rushes and passed judgment on style and content. Publicists wrote articles on the stars, thought up gimmicks to promote movies, and planned premieres and birthday bashes.

In time, each studio developed its own forte and came to be identified with a particular genre. Sampaguita was very successful with so-called women pictures and komiks adaptations. LVN had a gold mine in screwball comedies and swordplay. Premiere banked on action films.

Action films of this period were set in the past and in faraway lands. Adapted from folk tales or recreated according to the 19th-century *awit* and *korido* tradition, these films were set in medieval Europe or in South Sea islands. The hero is a romantic figure, handsome, self-effacing and quick-witted, who exhibits great skill in sports and the martial arts and is utterly compassionate toward the oppressed. Although he begins life as nobility, circumstances conspire to rob him of his birthright. He is raised among goats and cattle and endures humiliation. He learns early in life about the hardships of the masses. He is the underdog and the moviegoers identify with him. But these qualities are not enough to overcome a tyrant or a marauding army of invaders. A kind spirit

from heaven appears to reward his steadfastness with an amulet or a magic potion which enables him to vanquish his foes.

In *Prinsipe Teñoso* (Prince Teñoso), 1954, the handsome prince disobeys his father and offers food to a hungry beggar; he is exiled from the palace. The old man turns out to be a sorcerer who gives him the power to change his form and appearance. As a beggar, he wanders from country to country. One day, a beautiful princess spies him while he is taking a bath in the nude. When told to pick a husband, she chooses the beggar to the consternation of her father, the king. She is exiled and lives with him in a shack. Still in disguise, he learns that infidels are about to storm her father's palace. A prince again, he rescues his beloved's father, drives the invaders away, and is reunited with his family. He becomes the ruler of the two kingdoms.

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This tradition in action films is carried on through the decades to the present in movies starring the big action stars like Leopoldo Salcedo and Jose Padilla Jr. in the 1950s; Joseph Estrada, Tony Ferrer, and Jun Aristorenas in the 1960s; Ramon Revilla and Jess Lapid in the 1970s; Rudy Fernandez, Lito Lapid, and Phillip Salvador in the 1980s; and Fernando Poe Jr. in the last three and a half decades.

Musicals dramatize the wide gap between the rich and the poor, between landlords and tenants, between city mores and folk customs. Lovers vow undying love to each other in the beginning but are temporarily separated by parental disapproval or the temptations of the city. In *Paroparong Bukid* (Country Butterfly), 1938 and 1959, the mother forbids her daughter to be courted by a farmer and forces her to marry a crooked army official. In *Maalaala Mo Kaya?* (Will You Remember?), 1954, two lovers of humble origins sing their vows of eternal devotion and fidelity. Later their engagement is broken up by a wily city entrepreneur. They are reunited several years later by the same song they sang under the mango tree.

In *Pakiusap* (Plea), 1940, the landlord's son disguises himself as a peasant in order to serenade a pretty country lass. The duet "Dinggin" (Listen) express the surprise of their first meeting and the beneficial fruits of their love. However, the landlord has arranged for a marriage between his son and a city girl. The girl from Manila, dressed in Western clothes, sings in English while the country lass pours out her grief in the native tongue. The landlord himself offers marriage to the lovesick maiden in exchange for the release from prison of her father. The immortal *kundiman* of Francisco Santiago is sung on top of a papier-mache swan in a fluvial parade while the son plots the rescue of his beloved.

Though present-day musicals are less preoccupied with feudal realities, they are not much different from past productions. The stories still retell the trip from rags to riches. The rich and the poor still disagree and clash, and lovers have to overcome familial and societal prejudices before they can be united in holy matrimony. Such are the themes of movies like *Sa Libis ng Nasyon* (On the Outskirts of the Barrio) and *Batangueña* in the 1950s; *Stop, Look, Listen* and *Susanang Daldal* (Talkative Susan) in the 1960s; *Gift of Love* and *My Living Doll* in the 1970s; and *Bawat Pintig ng Puso* (Every Heartbeat) and *Bukas Luluhod ang mga Tala* (Tomorrow, the Stars Will Fall on their knees) in the 1980s.

Fantasy films use a host of special effects, but like other genres they dramatize the frustrations and heartbreaks of living in an oppressive environment. The early fantasy films were about people born different, people with physical defects who were considered outcasts by an insensitive populace. Only the intervention of deities could save the beleaguered from the evils of societal prejudice and even from imminent death.

In *Cofradia*, 1953, a black girl is discriminated against because of society's preference for Caucasian features. Her kindness to a stranger brings the gift of a candle which allows her to turn white when it is lighted. In *Tucydides*, 1954, a man and a woman in a barren marriage pray for a child. Their prayers are answered, but the child that is born to them is incredibly tiny, small enough to fit inside a pocket. They are ashamed of their offspring and often maltreat the poor girl. She finally runs away to Manila, becomes a normal woman, and saves a distraught lover from the schemes of his unfaithful sweetheart.

In *Dyesebel*, 1953, a girl who is half-fish is born to a childless couple. She is considered a handiwork of evil, and their neighbors curse and stone her. One day, even her father attempts to kill her. She swims down to the ocean floor and meets other mermaids. For a time, she is happy with her own kind but one day, she falls in love with a rich young man whose girlfriend plots his murder. She saves him and asks the wise old sea hag to transform her into a human being.

Since the 1950s, there have been countless remakes of fantasy films. Each generation has its own *Dyesebel* and its own *Darna*. Other important fantasy films are *Tuko sa Madre Kakaw* (Gecko at Madre Cacao), *Nagkita si Kerubin at Tulisang Pugot* (Cherubin Meets the Headless Bandit), *Kapitan Kidlat* (Captain Lightning) and *Mambo Dyambo* in the 1950s; *Anak ng Bulkan* (Child of the Volcano) and *Captain Barbell Contra Captain Bakal* (Captain Barbell vs Captain Iron) in the 1960s; *Ang Panday* (The Blacksmith) and *Ang Mahiwagang Daigdig ni Pedro Penduko* (The Wonderful World of Pedro Penduko) in the 1970s. Melodramas are about lives caught in the passions of the heart and undermined by poverty and prejudice. Tension-ridden and full of violent incidents, melodramas are cathartic experiences with the viewers closely identifying with the characters. In *Apat na Taga* (Four Slashes), 1954, a domineering mother destroys the lives of her children. She is punished for her cruelty when she is afflicted with tuberculosis and rejection by society. In *Busabos* (Slave), 1956, a rich lover is prevented from marrying his fiancée by his friends' intrigues and his mother's

admonition. The girl gets pregnant and is thrown out by her outraged parents. Years later, the lover is made to realize the purity of his sweetheart's intentions. In ***Pagdating ng Takipsilim*** (When Twilight Comes), 1956, college students play a prank on an unsuspecting colleague. They place bets on the ability of a pretty coed to win his heart. The ruse works and the trick is exposed. To forget her, the student enlists in the air force and becomes a pilot. The girl is apologetic and this time is really in love with him. However, as she is already engaged to be married, she cannot return his love. On her wedding day, the pilot drops flowers from the air. His plane crashes. The bride rushes to the scene of the crash, hears her lover calling her and herself falls from the cliff. The two souls are united in heaven.

In ***Roberta***, 1951, the classic melodrama which focuses on child abuse, a philandering husband beats up his wife and children. He leaves them for a bar girl with underworld connections. He returns home from time to time to wrest his wife's meager earnings as a laundrywoman. The children are forced to work and eventually the wife dies. The underworld characters are dissatisfied with the bar girl and kill her. They accuse the widowed husband of murder but there is a witness to the crime: Roberta. She is kidnapped by the goons to keep her away from the trial. She is rescued and offers the testimony that saves her father from the electric chair.

Surprisingly enough, melodramas in the succeeding decades are remakes of movies of this period. The plots are sometimes more dramatic, more turbulent, bespeaking of present harsh economic conditions. The themes and plot structures are similar. Important melodramas include ***Talipandas*** (Flirt) and ***Sino ang Maysala?*** (Who Is Guilty?) in the 1950s; ***Sapagkat Kami'y Tao Lamang*** (For We Are Only Human) and ***Kapantay ay Langit*** (As High as the Sky) in the 1960s; ***Maruja*** and ***Wanted: Perfect Mother*** in the 1970s; ***Bilangin ang Bituin sa Langit*** (Count the Stars in the Sky) and ***Imortal*** (Immortal) in the 1980s.

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In contrast, comedy offers relief from the problems of the day. Comedians capitalize



on social satire and jokes about physical deformities but in a lighthearted vein. In *Kambal Tuko* (Siamese Twins), 1952, Siamese twins fumble while trying to solve a robbery. In *Jack and Jill*, 1954, a gay character subscribes to a poetic view of life but this is undermined by his lower-class status.

Comedy continues to be an important moneymaker through the decades because of major comedians like Dolphy, whose major hits include *Jack and Jill*, 1954, *Hootsy-Kootsy*, 1955, and *Silveria*, 1958. Later, comedians like Chiquito, Panchito, and Ramon Zamora continued Dolphy's brand of comedy.

*Kandidato* (Candidate), 1949, takes potshots at the country's favorite pastime: politics. Two guerrillas try to free themselves from poverty's grip by providing consultancy services to two rich landlords. Through chicanery and expert double dealing, the two con men work on the gullibility of their victims. They spend all their money in trying to win the mayoral election. However, it is the third candidate who wins and the two landlords are reduced to poverty.

Though nonexistent for a time during the martial law period, political satire has returned as wry commentary on the politics of the nation. Films making fun of physical deformities have lost what might once have passed for subtle appeal and have deteriorated into blatant toilet humor.

## Epilogue

The studios began to falter in the early 1960s. There were labor problems. The top stars found it more profitable to set up their own companies and refused to renew their contracts. The most crucial factor was that, the studio heads failed to perceive changes in taste. The two matriarchs, Doña Sisang vda. de Leon of LVN and Doña Adela vda. de Santiago of Premiere, died in the 1960s leaving behind heirs who were not too keen on the movie business. In 1961 LVN stopped production but continued to offer postproduction services and lab facilities to independent producers. Premiere produced fewer movies. Only Sampaguita continued to flourish, thanks to the astuteness of its studio boss, Dr. Jose Perez. In 1975, Perez died, signalling the end of the customized dream factory, the assembly line rigorously supervised by a studio head.

With the decline and fall of the studios, a new era dawned. A new film industry emerged, shaped by a different outlook and changing values. It was not necessarily better than that of an earlier age, nor worse, but it was novel and exciting, and ultimately, beyond any individual's power to stop because its time had come. • A. Sotto