

Cast In Another Mould



6

ISHMAEL BERNAL

SPRING



I studied comparative literature in the late fifties in the university. This was one of the most interesting generations because it included as my contemporaries and friends Lino Brocka who became an internationally known filmmaker, Jose Maria Sison who became the chairman of the Communist Party of the Philippines, Carolina Malay who was an officer of the National Democratic Front (another communist organisation, the official communist organisation of the Philippines), Nur Misuari with whom I had played cops and robbers in the dormitory and who is now Chairman of the National Liberation Front, Behn Cervantes who became a well-known hero and movie director, Joonee Gamboa who became a respected character actor....

In the 60s after graduating from the university of Philippines I became an active member of the Film Society of Philippines which sponsored film festivals and which also at the time sponsored the first international short film festival sometime in 1967. The Film Society was then headed by Ben Pinga and I was the secretary. I was very much involved and was active as project coordinator of the festival. Because of this they sent in my name as a candidate for the Colombo Plan scholarship to study film directing at the Film Institute of India in Pune. This was approved by the Department of Foreign Affairs and I was sent to Pune.

Before I went to India, for one year, after my studies in the University of Philippines, I studied French literature in France. When I came home I continued to study French at the University of Philippines, and then I opened a coffee shop!

We could not study cinema in the Philippines then. Even the mass communications course

was introduced after my generation passed out in the 60s. In the university we had no formal film education at all. I had no difficulty understanding films in Hindi at the Institute in Pune because they are so much like the Filipino films. There is always a good looking handsome boy and the rich, very, very beautiful leading lady plus a comedian, and a grandmother/father somewhere along with the villain with a moustache, and they will end up singing somewhere on the bank or under the tree and they will hold hands, look at each other and not kiss! That is much like the Filipino films of that time. But, in addition to this, in India I saw all the classics of world cinema - Russian, Hungarian, Italian - every night, yes, every night.

I started writing reviews in 1970 for *The Manila Chronicle*. There were three of us who were doing serious film reviews for this paper. Myself, Behn Cervantes and Nestor Torre who is an active movie critic even today. I was with the *Chronicle* for about a year. Then Lino Brocka made a big splash in 1970 with his first movie - *Wanted: A Perfect Mother*. It was a big, big hit and like in other countries, the minute a hit is made they try to copy it and sell it. All the big producers in town were looking for another Lino Brocka in the universities, in the theatres, and the most likely candidate to be another Brocka was me! They discovered me and I was in. So I did my first movie *At the Top* which I had written in Pune, by the way, to drive away the lonely nights. (I wrote two scripts which I planned to direct in the Philippines. The other script that I did in India was *Speck in the Water*, a satire on Manila, that I made in 1976.) And so another Lino Brocka was born.

The first film was a critical

success. It was, what you can call, an outhouse hit. It did not really make waves as a commercial film although the stars were popular at the time. It earned some nominations and won the award for the best screenplay and best editing. It was pitted against a giant - Gerry De Leon. The public felt it was my actress, Rita Gomez, who should have won the best actress award, but De Leon's lead actress won the award against all expectations.

This was a generation of four new directors in the industry. There were two other directors, Elwood Perez and Joey Gosiengfiao, at this time, who were from the universities, particularly the University of East, doing theatre and TV work very, very well. So they were also invited into the industry. They became very, very popular and big commercial directors. Celso Ad. Castillo was there too. They were followed by Mike De Leon in the mid-70s - he had studied filmmaking in Germany and made many great films. He has now retired and is a recluse, unfortunately.

We all formed a gang. We were friends and saw each others' films enthusiastically. We were having fun, the world was ours and our sworn enemy was Marcos! We were young filmmakers, beautiful and talented and had a common cause - to improve the quality of the Filipino cinema, by which we meant at the time, reacting to the previous generation of Filipino films, that is, the cinema of the 60s which produced sex and cowboy movies, James Bond movies, Hollywood copies, Elvis Presley movies. So our generation of filmmakers introduced social realism, and psychological insights into characters, breaking down stereotypes, the bad clichés, and did away with James Bond and cowboys, kicking them out of

City After
Dark (1980)

films by doing good socio-realistic, psychological dramas.

With the advent of new directors and writers from the universities there was really a new wave. Everything changed in consonance. All the events came together as a confluence. Very important writers like Pette Lacaba, who is a journalist, wrote many films. Butch Dalisay, Professor of English at the University of Philippines, wrote scripts for Lino Brocka and for other directors. With this new wave came the organisation of film critics which Cervantes and I started in the *Chronicle*. This organisation was the first of its kind to study Philippine cinema at a serious level. So the 70s saw the second wave or the second golden period of the Philippine cinema, the first being in the 50s - when there were directors like Eddie Romero.

In 1976 several classics were made. All the important directors had at least one good film in that one year. I made two! This was the year Lino Brocka came in, and there were something like 15 beautiful films to choose from. I remember they nominated six when it was customary to nominate only five. Among them were Mike De Leon, Im Shang, Lino Brocka, Eddie Romero. Among the others was my *The Lost Flower* which got lost in the melee.

By the mid-70s (about '74) I had become commercially viable and I was averaging three to four films a year. Other directors made, maybe, 12-13 films annually. The technique was to gather my friends for a brainstorming and that included George Arago and Ricky Lee. We would put up a story line or a concept, all of us together and shooting would take place in one month or a month and a half. They were simple films anyway, basically urban, deep kitchen-sink dramas, living room



dramas that were simple to shoot. It took me two to three months to complete one. If I finish such and such a film on Monday, it is already in the lab on Monday. On Tuesday I would begin another film. Each film was produced by a different person. But I worked with my staff consistently. It was like a film course, like a Fellini film, where I travelled from one studio to another, with all my staff without any sleep. When I began work in the first half of the 70s I was consciously trying to do only one film at a time and to give it my best effort and concentration. But in 1978 I fell sick with appendicitis and was hospitalised for one month and asked by the doctor to rest for another month which incapacitated me for two

months. The producers in town were waiting for my services because I had signed contracts with them. Because of this delay, after two months of illness, I ended up doing four films at the same time. I would shoot for a film, rush to a hotel for a night shooting at midnight, and then I would rush to another shooting for another producer at 1:00 a.m. At 5:00 a.m. I would sleep in the car and then go to the fourth film without any sleep. Usually the major stars were responsible for this kind of schedule. It was madness and I was in tears all the time because my body was aching and I was crying myself to sleep each time. I would pray everyday (not publicly but privately!) that the superstar would arrive late or he would

get sick or die or something so that I would not have to shoot him. But for many other directors this was routine work.

But this too passed. When I had no work in the 80s I was mature and sophisticated enough to know that these are the whims and fancies of the industry, the treacherous wheel of fortune.

In 1987 I made *Picked up from Earth*, a melodrama which was based on a popular comic serial, and then followed it up in 1988 with *Smouldering Tears*, another melodrama inspired by a comic serial. These two films were made to prove to Mother Lily and to the movie industry that I was capable of making comic

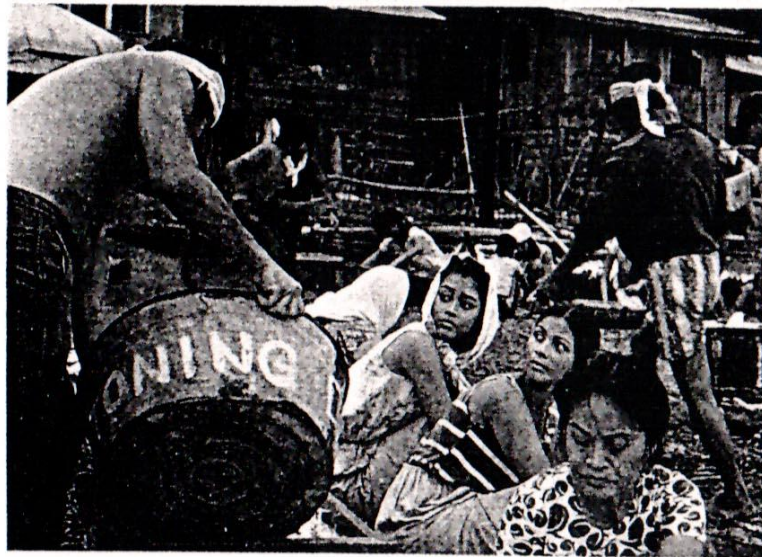
Both of them were successful.

In 1986 after the uprising and after Mrs Aquino became the President she foisted her daughter Kris Aquino as a movie actress on the public. This affected the quality of films. Because she was the President's daughter she became an instant star without any sacrifice, without any preparation for the art of acting, without even an aptitude for acting or for business. The first movie she did was made by a director who was unknown to the medium. With this film began the rise, the popularity, of what we call films of toilet humour and also the trend of finishing a film in twelve days time which meant

was an official government policy proclaiming that the Arts occupied low priority. We were appalled that at the very beginning of the Aquino administration the first statement that emanated from the palace was that culture was going to be the last priority. What was even more galling was that they really did it. So the state of the film industry in particular, and the state of the arts in general, during the Aquino administration (and even to this day), just decayed - it went to the dogs, it went to the rats!

There was a lot of complaint about the Marcos' attitude towards the arts but compared to the following administration it was more supportive. Imelda Marcos had some eccentric attitudes, but in the long term at least there were some concrete initiatives. Whatever their objectives and political corruption they had a more understanding attitude towards the censors, the Film Centre, and a respect for the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines which produced *Doea Tanda, Mata* and *Himala*. The institute held two international film festivals which were eye openers for the Filipino public. For us they were windows to world cinema and the international film scene.

Not that I was personally influenced by any of the films because by that time - the festivals were in 1980-81 - I had been in the business of making films for 10-11 years. I was influenced by three big festivals in the 60s as a young student. These were the festivals that were initiated by the glitterati, principally headed by the Rejii Moreno. His film society, for example, showed Kurosawa films like *Rashomon*, plus the great Satyajit Ray films - *The Apu Trilogy*, *Devi* and *Charulata*. The filmmakers of the 70s, that is my generation,



melodramas that all the other directors, except me, had been doing in the past. For many, many years I had rejected the idea of doing these kind of films because I thought they were beneath me; but career pressures, commercial pressure plus the pressure of Mother Lily, in a sense, forced me to make them. In those years after exile, my services as a director were hardly required and my telephone was ringing less and less. So to prove that I was still around and capable of fighting in the arena of commercialism, I did these two commercial films.

(with due respect to everybody) no script, no storyline and a lot of scruff, scramble and slapstick. There was a period when this kind of film generally promoted and projected the worst side of the Filipino character and psyche. At that time many of the so called serious directors like Marilou Diaz-Abaya, myself and Lino Brocka (who was still alive at the time - he died in 1991), Mike de Leon, Celso Ad. Castillo, Eddie Romero had been out of jobs for a long, long time. Laurice Guillen managed because she made films based on comic material. In 1986 there

Nunal sa Tubig
(Speck in the Water, 1976)



Himala
(Miracle,
1981)

were influenced by the festivals held in the mid-60s. We even got to see classics like *The Cranes are Flying* from other countries.

I think, honestly, I regret joining the rat race. If I had to do it all over again I would not have joined the rat race that was show business and filmmaking in the 70s and early 80s. I would have chosen more carefully the films that I wanted to make. Many that I did are forgettable, regrettable and unnecessary. At the time of doing them my excuse was that they were exercises, while I was waiting for the big break. But now I think that they weren't exercises, just excuses. I could have done without them. Anyway, I could have streamlined my filmography better and not ruined my talent on the side! You succumb to the system. Looking back now, in

the sunset of our years, we could have done away with some of the things that we did.

Of course, there are always reasons for joining the rat race. Internationally it is said that a film, or a director or an actor is always only as good as his last film. I followed that philosophy, regrettably enough. I do one hit; which means I can afford to do another flop; so I do something serious, something that is an experiment; it becomes a flop and then another commercial project! This goes on flop, hit, flop, hit, and on and on and on. That is the rat race I was talking about.

I guess people would not admit that they were not thinking of the international market, but still one just concentrated more on the job at hand. The whole question of making a film for the international audience rather

than the people at home - this is happening to a lot of Asian filmmakers now. Among my films only *Manila by Night* and *Himala* came to be known internationally.

Manila by Night was made in 1980. I remember that the censorship was so strict then that it was not allowed to leave the country. The first lady (Mrs Marcos) did not want Manila to be associated with any poverty or squalor. But it reached the international festivals. I did make some other serious films like *On Borrowed Time/Lend Me a Morning*, and prior to that I did *Snatched from Heaven*.

By the 80s Mother Lily had caught me in her Venus fly trap, slapped me with a big contract, and despite that I did some of my best work under Mother Lily without her knowledge. I gave *The Affair*, *Broken Marriage*, *Snatched from Heaven* and

Manila by Night and subverted her plans. These were films that won awards eventually and went to festivals in Canada, Tokyo, Hawaii, Amsterdam, London. All this happened without her knowledge. I was exaggerating, of course, during the NETPAC conference, when I said that producers should be banned, but in fact, it was an exaggeration that I practise. Mother Lily did not know and I did not let her know that I was doing this kind of film.

She thought that I was doing her usual kitchen-sink melodramas, but she wasn't aware that I was changing the script. So, after a movie she comes and tells me, "You stupid



fool, you going to give me another award! You are going to another festival with my money and the award." But she was wonderful. Unlike other producers she was utterly wonderful. She likes the money, of course, otherwise why would she bother about me or Marilou Diaz-Abaya. She called up a week ago asking for another stupid film from me.

Maybe I will give her another festival film!

She has monopolised the industry, so since the 80s I have been working only for her. When we talk of the film industry we are talking of Mother Lily. She produces about

25 films a year, she has all the stars, she owns the theatres, she owns the bookings, she owns the country because she is the Secretary of Education. She dictates what the movie industry will do, what the public will watch. So it is Mother Lily's values that are being propagated. The Filipino public is being instructed by Mother Lily films.

Horror films, sex films, melodramas, slapstick comedies, toilet humour, everything that is hopeless, helpless, bad, negative about Filipino culture, dehydration, the moral aridity, and the cultural vacuum and the vapidness, the stupidity, the ridiculous and the neurosis, all

of that laid out to the public to enjoy and squirm about - all our dirtiness, it is really a big, big, mess.

We are conscious of that to the extent that we, our group, my generation, my friends, broke away first, from the Film Academy of the Philippines because we thought that they were weak and were not doing

anything to improve the quality of the Filipino films, and established our own Directors Guild of the Philippines with its new president, Marilou Abaya, and new members. We streamlined our ranks to a membership of only 40 - all working, active, quality directors. Earlier the Directors Guild included every Tom, Dick and Harry, even those whose last film had been made in 1948. It had something like 160 film directors. So this was our first strong move. Eventually we joined forces with the Film Academy because we thought that we were strong enough as a force, as a group able to

FILMOGRAPHY

1971

Pagdating Sa Dulo
(At The Top)
Dahuyong (Wave)

1972

El Vibora
Inspersasyon (Inspiration)
Hangang Kamatayan
(Till Death Do Us Part)

1973

Now and Forever
Zoom, Zoom, Superman
Si Popeye at Iba Pa
(Popeye and Others)

1974

Sleeping Dragon
Pito Ang Asawa
(The Seven Wives)
Mister Mo, Lover Boy Ko
(Your Mister, My Lover Boy)

1975

Scotch on the Rocks, to Remember Black Coffee to Forget
Lumapit, Lumayo ang Asawa (Morning Comes, Morning Goes)

1976

Nunal sa Tubig (Speck in the Water)
Ligaw Na Bulaklak
(The Lost Flower)
Babaing Hiwalay Sa Asawa (The Woman Separated from Her Husband)

1977

Tisoy (Filipino Comic Character)
Dalawang Pugad, Isang Ibon (Two Nests, One Bird)
Labing Pilipino
(Philippine Race)
Walang Katapusang Tag-Araw (Never Ending Summer)

1978

Lagi Na Lamang ba Akong Babae (Will I Always Remain a [new]

Above Left:
Ishmael Bernal directing Marcel Soriano in *Hinugot sa Langit* (Snatched from Heaven, 1987)

Woman?)

1978

Isang Gabi sa Iyo, Isang Gabi sa Akin (One Night with You, One Night with Me)

Ikaw ay Akin (You Are Mine)

1979

Menor of Edad (Underage)

Boy Kodyak (Boy Kojak)

Bakit May Pag-Ibig pa? (Why Is There Love?)

1980

Salawaban (False Hearted)

Good Morning, Sunshine
Sugat sa Ugat (Wound in a Root)

City after Dark

1981

Bilibid Boys (Boys in Jail)

Pabling (Little Pablo)

Himala (Miracle)

1982

Ito Ba Ang Ating Mga Anak? (Are These Our Children?)

Galawgaw (Not Lady-like)

Relasyon (An Affair)

Hindi Kita Malimot

(I can't Forget You/
Unforgettable)

1987

Hinugot Sa Langit

(Snatched from Heaven)

Pinulot Ka Lang Sa Lupa

(Picked up from Earth)

1988

Nagbabagang Luba

(Smouldering Tears)

1989

Pabiram Ng Isang Umaga

(On Borrowed Time/Lend Me a Morning)

1992

Mabal Kita Walang Iba

(I Love You, No One Else)

1994

Wating

(Street Smart/The Tough Guys)



Pabling (Little Pablo, 1981)

influence the Film Academy and persuade the Film Academy to improve. We are now working for a legislation on the question of the imposition of very, very heavy taxes on the actors; we have a committee on censorship and a task force. As a matter of fact, this controversy at the moment over the misreading of names² is not the first time it has happened. It happens year after year in many other forms. There was another actor who was nominated for the best supporting actor in the early 80s. This actor blah, blah, blah was nominated for the film blah, blah, blah and the actor stood up and said, "No, I am not in that movie!" We hope that this time the uproar will provide an opportunity to, sort of, cleanse the industry, to plead guilty to its lack of responsibility to the public, to catch the guilty but also to improve itself, to become more mature and to grow, so that we can have a more internationally-oriented cinema in the near future.

After 1989, I was thinking of retiring, not retiring completely, but partially. The situation was hopeless. The movies were very bad, the offers were very bad. So I didn't do films for some years. I did my last film in 1988. Then for about three years I did

not do a movie. I didn't do anything, and then in 1993-94 I said, "Oh, shit, I might as well do some theatre and collect my stage price." Anton Juan, one of the youngest and most powerful theatre directors cajoled me into doing a very, very interesting play, *Death in the Form of a Rose*, based on the life of Pasolini who was murdered on the outskirts of Rome. I was attracted to the play and the character and I did it and loved it. And finally I was a star! It was a very, very good experience and I enjoyed myself immensely. For the first time I was very happy. When I was a student in the University of Philippines I did bit parts. So this was the first time I was being directed and it was a wonderful experience and I enjoyed every minute of it. The story was very close to my life. A crazy director like Pasolini, a crazy communist director, he was my lover in the play. So that was a big success even commercially and hundreds of people saw it at the University of Philippines. There were about 30-40 performances both in English and Tagalog. Then the following year Anton Juan cast me in his next play - *Bacchae* of Euripides - and I played the mother of the boy. It

was also very successful commercially. There was this incident on the opening night: my crown fell to the floor and my gown got stuck on a nail at a crucial moment in the play when I discover that I was the one who had incapacitated my own son and I scream in agony, that I am the murderess of my own son. My gown was stuck on a nail and as I began this tragic, ripping scream the audience started to giggle and giggle and laugh until it finally became an uproar!

Before I started acting I had directed plays, Brecht's plays among them, including *The Threepenny Opera* for the Cultural Centre of the Philippines. This was during the three years that I was not doing films. I directed many nationalist plays on urban problems, labour problems, peasant problems, American visas, and all the issues pertaining to the problems of nationalism in progressive theatre. I also did television documentaries on video, on land reform and on the foreign debt, on the theology of liberation, on small fishermen. The one on foreign debt is being distributed by the Freedom From Debt Coalition through its network all over the world. It was redone again by George. I did a telemovie on domestic helpers abroad, this one in particular about domestic helpers in London. I was very active in the theatre and as a nationalist I was marching in the streets all the time, against censorship, against poverty....

Now I have made a come back with *Waiting* which is superficially about car napping but is really about our face of shame and horror. I think basically it is a film about religious fanaticism.

Notes

1. Mother Lily is one of the most important producers in the Philippine film industry, responsible for about 25% of the total annual production.

2. In June 1994 at the Manila Film Festival awards function the presenter announced Ruffa Gutierrez' and Gabby Concepcion's names as best actress and actor instead of those of the actual winners. This led to an uproar, the outcome of which was that cases were filed against seven showbiz personalities: Talent manager Lolita Solis, Medved, Viveka Babajee, Ruffa and Rocky Gutierrez, their mother, and Gabby Concepcion. The Mayor also called for a ban in local theatres of films featuring Ruffa and Gabby. This incident highlighted the mafia-like control movie scribes, managers, publicists and talent agents have over the stars and the industry.

As told to Aruna Vasudev

44th Melbourne International Film Festival June 8 - 25, 1995

AUSTRALIA'S
FOREMOST
FESTIVAL
SHOWCASING
ASIAN CINEMA

- Asian Cinema Focus
- International Short Film Competition
- New Australian Cinema program
- buried treasures
little known gems from the
hundred years of the cinema
- Special programmes
on dance, design,
animation,
photography,
multi-media and the
environment
- international guests

more details?
fax 613 - 417 3804
tel 613 - 417 2011
internet - coming soon