

Velasco's Legacy
by Jerrold Tarog

Huwaran/Hulmahan Atbp.: The Film Writings of Johven Velasco

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This isn't exactly a book review as much as a personal statement – a futile wish to have *more* of Johven Velasco's knowledge revealed to and shared with filmmakers, critics, and enthusiasts. Velasco had been a source of excellent advice during my college days when I was the lone music major enrolled in film theory classes (the puzzled looks of film majors were priceless, by the way). Velasco was generous with his time, accommodating me after class hours to scrutinize my latest attempts in scriptwriting. He was generous with encouragement, persuading me in his gentle way to continue on my chosen path. In the end, it wasn't just about what Velasco taught me, it was also about how he treated me and everyone else. With the publication of *Huwaran/Hulmahan Atbp.*, we can now say that Velasco remains generous even in his death, imparting to us a collection of texts that attests to his wide grasp of Philippine cinema, and leaving us with a sense of loss in what could have been.

In the book, Velasco examines narrative trends and gender issues, explains the practices of the entertainment industry (with particular focus on the star system), and outlines the shifting semiotic terrain of Philippine mainstream cinema. It's a pleasant tour of subjects that would have otherwise been hastily dismissed by film critics of my generation, who have little patience for the calculated ways in which major studios manipulate the mass audience. You can't blame today's critics, of course. In the past, there was a chance, no matter how slim, for culturally relevant films to be released through the studio machinery, but now there is only the independent sector and whatever works for it. Some might say the Metro Manila Film Festival is the season when studio films strive to be relevant. But these films are judged according to box-office receipts, and the resulting confusion of intent effectively diminishes the season's significance.

Regardless of what anyone thinks about the mainstream, there is undeniable value in knowing how major stars were packaged then and now, in how the dream factories of the '50s and '60s continue to manufacture dreams today, and in how much or how little Philippine cinema has changed through the years. Velasco also devotes a few sections to the increasing relevance of independent cinema but these are the parts I'd consider, if anything, unfinished. Independent cinema was just growing from puberty to young adulthood when he died. There is much more to say, good and bad, about indies now than there was two years ago. The last part of the book – a lengthy letter detailing his experience in Korea – is perhaps the most vivid as it reveals Velasco's vulnerable and humorous side. It brought me back to college. There's Sir Johven behind the desk in his cramped office after class, and there I am, sitting on a bench, flanked by moldy VHS tapes, listening to his stories and sharing a laugh or two at life's absurdities.

Johven Velasco died two months before the premiere of my debut feature film. I wanted him to see it. I wanted to know what he thought, whether all the talks we had

and all the videotapes of classic films he lent me to study at home bore any worthwhile fruit. I wasn't his most prized student, that much is a fact. After I was graduated, we rarely got the chance to speak. And I never knew the extent of his personal and professional woes until I read Joel David's introduction to the book. But Velasco will always remain significant in my mind because he was right beside me when I took the first step. He was there when I could barely imagine getting to where I am now – two feature films, barely past the starting line, and now writing a book review. With *Huwaran/Hulmahan Atbp.*, Velasco becomes even more significant to anyone who cares deeply about Philippine cinema because his knowledge – founded on solid theory and practice – has been collected, shared, and opened to further analysis and contemplation. If you give a damn about films, you'll gain something useful with this book.

I wish now, in the same way I wished during the premiere of my first film, that he had left us with more, or that he had not left us so soon. Because imagine what it would be like if he were still here today – Philippine cinema at a historical crossroads – and him, the astute observer and wise commentator watching, not from the sidelines, but right beside us. Imagine the extra chapters he'd write.

(The author was a major in Composition at the College of Music of the University of the Philippines. As of this writing, he directed the 2007 CinemaOne Best Picture winner, Confessional, as well as the 2009 Cinemalaya entry Mangatyanan. Both are installments in his Camera Trilogy.)