

MUSICAL

The musical is a romantic comedy with songs, dances, and skits. It may use existing songs or original compositions. There are four kinds of Filipino musicals: the **filmed sarswela**, which is directly lifted from its stage version, such as *Walang Sugat* (Not Wounded), 1939; the **sarswela-type musical**, which uses all the elements of the theatrical sarswela, although it is conceived only for the screen and has no stage version, such as *Giliw Ko* (My Love), 1939; the **Hollywood-type musical**, which has a distinctly American flavor, such as *The Big Broadcast*, 1962; and the **new musical**, as exemplified by *Kakabakaba Ka Ba?* (Thrilled?), 1980, and *Pabling*, 1981.

In the filmed sarswela, there is a direct transfer from stage to screen. The stage production of the *sarswela* is reproduced on film in its entirety, sometimes with the same stage actors. This was the case with Jose Nepomuceno's first movie, *Dalagang Bukid* (Country Maiden), 1919, which reproduced on film Hermogenes Ilagan's sarswela popularized on stage by Atang de la Rama and Marceliano Ilagan.

When film acquired sound in the age of talking pictures, the sarswela slowly bowed out of stage. But since this kind of musical still appealed to the public, movie producers commissioned sarswela-type films

ROMANTIC MUSICAL Elsa Oria steps between the rival brothers, Ely Ramos, left, and Teddy Benavides in Sampaguita's *Madaling Araw*, 1938. (Teddie Co Collection)



that retained most, if not all, of the elements of the theatrical sarswela. These musicals were pioneered by the team of Carlos Vander Tolosa, Mike Velarde, and Luis Nolasco who were behind such film projects as *Nasaan Ka, Irog?* (Where Are You, Beloved?), 1937, and *Madaling Araw* (Break of Dawn), 1938. The biggest musical star of the prewar period was Elsa Oria, the "Singing Sweetheart of the Philippines," whose sarswela-type films were warmly received regardless of who played her leading men. Aside from making *Nasaan Ka, Irog?* with Angel Esmeralda and *Madaling Araw* with Ely Ramos, she also performed with Rogelio de la Rosa in *Bituing Marikit* (Beautiful Star), 1937; Leopoldo Salcedo in *Alitaptap* (Firefly), 1940; and Rudy Concepcion in *Paroparong Bukid* (Country Butterfly), 1938, and *Ikaw Rin* (You, Too), 1940. When love teams became the vogue, this type of musical was made more popular by Rosario Moreno and Rudy Concepcion in *Pakiusap* (Plea), 1940; Lucita Goyena and Serafin Garcia in *Ang Viuda Alegre* (The Merry Widow), 1941; and, most of all, by the Carmen Rosales-Rogelio de la Rosa tandem in such musicals as *Señorita* (Young Mistress), 1940; *Lambingan* (Romance), 1940; *Panambitan* (Lament), 1941; and *Tampuhan* (Love Spat), 1941.

During the war, when film production was suspended, Filipinos went to see plays, stage shows and *bodabil* instead of their usual film fare. After the war, the sarswela-type musical showed a more pragmatic sensibility, combining lyricism and realism. This was evident in such films as the Pancho Magalona and Tita Duran starrer, *Sa Isang Sulyap Mo, Tita* (With One Glance from You, Tita), 1953; the Nida Blanca-Nestor de Villa pictures like *Waray-Waray*, 1954, and *Ikaw Kasi* (You Are to Blame), 1955; the Gloria Romero-Luis Gonzales musicals like *Sa Libis ng Nayon* (At the Countryside), 1959; and the Zaldy Zshornack-Shirley Gorospe attractions like *Sweethearts*, 1957.

The Hollywood-type musicals ushered in the era of big production numbers and star-studded casts such as those found in Sampaguita's *The Big Broadcast*, 1962. The musicals in the 1970s were dominated by singing star Nora Aunor and matinee idol Tirso Cruz III who appeared in films like *Guy and Pip*, 1971. The influence of Hollywood could be seen in these musicals' extravagant sets, lavish costumes, and big production numbers. They were mostly inspired by the movies of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, especially those that starred the MGM bathing beauty, Esther Williams. *Annie Batungbakal*, 1974, was a take-off on the Hollywood disco movie, *Saturday Night Fever*, and many a Filipino teenager aped John Travolta gyrating to the melody of a Beethoven symphony.



The makers of the new musicals have been driven by considerations which go beyond pure entertainment and visual delight. *Pabling* (Playboy), 1981, underscored the gap between the urban and rural social classes in its account of the exploits of a young man, a *prom-di* (from the province) going to the big city in quest of fame and fortune. The Mike de Leon film, *Kakabakaba Ka Ba?*, particularly in its closing production number, satirized the imperialistic designs on the country. It highlighted its political message with a dazzling array of witty visual and optical effects.

In general, practically any type of story, from the tragic to the comic to the fantastic, can be utilized for film musicals, although an unfortunate impression of frivolity and extravagance has been attached to the genre. More often than not, musicals tend to deal with romantic or comic themes, rather than serious ones.

In comparing the musicals made from the 1930s to the 1950s with the musicals of the late 1960s and early 1970s, one finds that nothing of real artistic import was produced in the latter period. This was due not so much to the juvenility of the talents as to the misappropriation of musical routines at the expense of thematic development. While the earlier studio-system musical was based on serviceable stories, the teen-idol

NEW MUSICAL The finale in Mike de Leon's *Kakabakaba Ka Ba?*, 1980, an LVN film, marks a significant break from stereotype techniques in cinema musicals. (Cesar Hernando 1980, LVN Pictures Collection)

films used hackneyed situations (meddlesome adults and misfits getting in the way of the lead characters' romance) to bridge musical numbers. These musical numbers in turn consisted of the latest hits, usually foreign, strung together without regard for topical relations and interpreted to resemble the original versions as closely as possible.

In the end, this throwback to the *bodabil* tradition was accommodated by television, whose perpetual disruptions (by commercials and station-identification breaks) and documentary immediacy justified the abandonment of narrative threads. A Filipino musical can now normally be witnessed (and be commercially feasible) only on this medium, although the old tradition of inserting musical numbers in comedies or fantasies persists to the present. • J. David, L. Pareja and N.G. Tiongson. With notes from P. de Castro III and B. Lumbea.