

## MUSICAL

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with notes from Pio de Castro III and Bienvenido Lumbera  
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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 sarsuwela**, which is directly lifted from its stage version, such as *Walang Sugat* (No Wounds), 1939; the **sarsuwela-type musical** or **film sarsuwela**, which uses all the elements of the theatrical sarsuwela, 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? (Will Your Heart Beat Faster?)*, 1980, and *Pabling* (Playboy), 1981. 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 the filmed sarsuwela, there is a direct transfer from stage to screen. The stage production of the sarsuwela 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 sarsuwela popularized on stage by Atang de la Rama and Marceliano Ilagan.

With the advent of sound in the age of talking pictures, the sarsuwela slowly bowed out of stage. But since this kind of musical still appealed to the public, movie producers commissioned sarsuwela-type films that retained most, if not all, of the elements of the theatrical form. These musicals were pioneered by the team of Carlos Vander Tolosa, Mike Velarde, and Luis Nolasco who were behind such films 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 sarsuwela-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 tandem of Carmen Rosales and Rogelio de la Rosa in such musicals as *Señorita* (Young Mistress), 1940; *Lambingan* (Romance), 1940; *Panambitan* (Lament), 1941; and *Tampuhan* (Lovers' Quarrel), 1941.



Yolanda Marquez and Ernesto La Guardia in Carlos Vander Tolosa's *Madaling Araw*, 1938 (CCP Collection)



Joe Jardi, Nanette Inventor, Johnny Delgado, and Boboy Garrovillo in Mike de Leon's *Kakabakaba Ka Ba?*, 1980 (Cesar Hernandez)

During the World War II, when film production was suspended, Filipinos went to see plays, stage shows, and *bodabil* instead of their usual film fare. After the war, the sarsuwela-type musical showed a more pragmatic sensibility, combining lyricism and realism. This was evident in such films as the Pancho Magalona–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. Separated by many years, *I Do Bidoo Bidoo: Heto nAPO Sila!* (I Do Bidoo Bidoo: The APO Is Here!), 2012, displays the same sensibility. Featuring the musical hits of one of the country's most enduring singing groups, the APO Hiking Society, its narrative tells of a romance between a boy and a girl from opposite sides of the social spectrum. Through their journey toward marriage, their families, initially at war with each other mainly because of class-related differences, discover certain truths and epiphanies about themselves and the power of love.

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*, 1979, was

a takeoff on the Hollywood disco movie *Saturday Night Fever*, 1977, which was so popular that many a Filipino teenager aped the moves of John Travolta. 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 musicals were based on serviceable stories, the teen-idol 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.

The makers of the new musicals were driven by considerations that go beyond pure entertainment and visual delight. *Pabling* underscores the gap between the urban and rural social classes in its account of the exploits of a young man, a *promdi* (from the province) going to the big city in quest of fame and fortune. *Kakabakaba Ka Ba?*, particularly in its closing production number, satirizes the imperialistic designs of Japan and China on the country. It highlights its political message with a dazzling array of witty visual and optical effects. The new musical came back in 2006 through *Zsazsa Zaturannah: Ze Moveeh* (*Zsazsa Zaturannah: The Movie*), a film adaptation of Carlo Vergara's graphic novel *Ang Kagilagilalas na Pakikipagsapalaran ni Zsazsa Zaturannah* (*The Amazing Adventures of Zsazsa Zaturannah*), 2002. The narrative, a gender-bending version of the Darna story, features Ada, the gay *parlorista* (beautician) who turns into a female superhero, Zsazsa Zaturannah, when he swallows a magical stone. After many hurdles, she finds the love of her life in the character of Dodong. Another musical, *Emir*, 2010, follows the story of Amelia, a girl from a poor Ilocano family who serves a royal family in the Middle East and gets attached to their child Ahmed, whom she saves when the war destroys the palace. Ahmed is later taken away from Amelia under the sheik's order. Amelia goes home to the Philippines, but several years later Ahmed visits Amelia and the film ends with their reunion. Thus, the radical shift from the musicals of the 1970s, which merely feature the latest hits around which the films' stories are woven, to the new musicals with more original stories represents a significant movement not only in the arena of Philippine cinema but in Philippine music as well. ✨