

Faith-healer Antonio Agpaoa hacking away at white flesh in the dead of night Dwight Eisenhower as a rather obscure resident of prewar Manila Da Flash of lightning that was Gabriel Elorde in his electrifying prime The Guerrero bishop who waged a nationalist struggle against the ultramontane party in the Philippines Nora Aunor during her novice days as superstar and national sweetheart and other profiles caught by the candid-camera style of a keen reporter.

Quijano de Manila's reportage has through the years amassed snapshots of scores of personalities: saint & sinner, poet & peasant, big shot & small fry, the beautiful & damned. This volume collects a number of his pieces, though not in chronological order. Whatever has since happened to them, the subjects exist here as they were during one "mortal moment": the moment when they were news or in some way excited other people's interest. Quijano de Manila is for people who like people.

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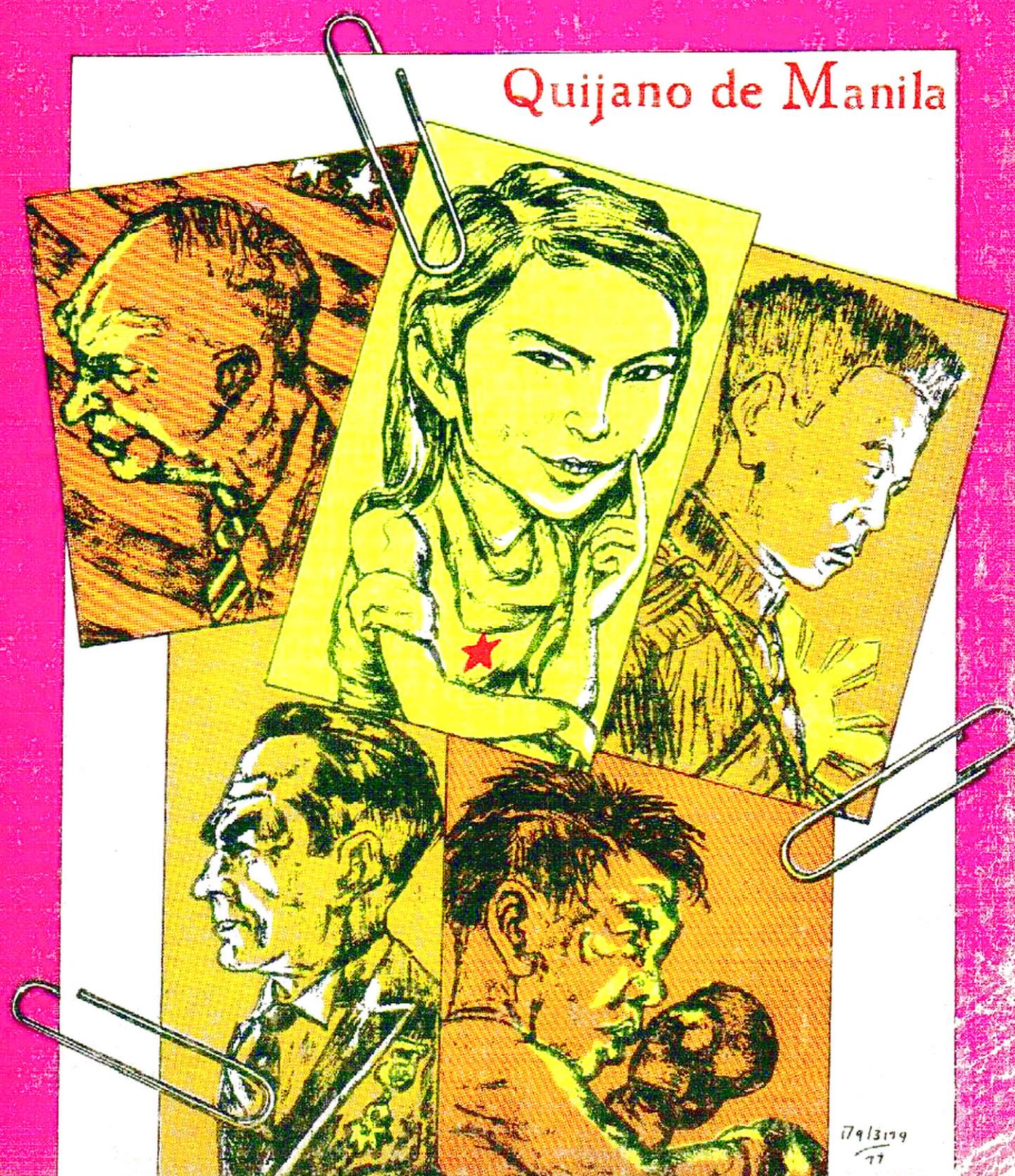
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NORA AUNOR & OTHER PROFILES / Quijano de Manila

NORA AUNOR & OTHER PROFILES

Quijano de Manila



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NORA AUNOR
AND
OTHER
PROFILES

by

QUIJANO DE MANILA

1977

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GOLDEN GIRL

July 1970

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a little girl who seemed to have been born under a very unlucky star.

She was born small and weak, a sickly baby. Again and again she would shake with convulsions and fix her eyes in a dying stare. One night, soon after she was born, she fell so ill, burning with fevers and shaking with chills, that her mother rushed her to church and had her baptized in a hurry, late in the night.

“My baby won’t live,” cried the poor mother.

The baby was christened Nora.

All through childhood, little Nora Villamayor, the fourth of five children continued to be very frail of health. She was always having those chills and fevers and spasms. The physicians couldn’t cure her. So, her parents consulted herb healers and village medicine men. “A bad wind got into your child,” said the witch doctors. But their magics couldn’t cure the ailing little girl either. What she suffered from was the cruel sickness called poverty, a disease endemic in her country. There’s no

medicine for that in the hospitals or in the witch doctor's bag.

Nora's family, the Villamayors, lived in a nipa hut in the Bicol town of Iriga. The two-room hut belonged to the family of Nora's mother and the Villamayors were only allowed to live there. Nora's father worked as porter at the railroad station. Until he came home at night with the day's earnings, his wife couldn't buy supper for the family. There were times when the children went to sleep without eating.

When she was seven years old, Nora went through a crisis. She had her most severe fit: fearful convulsions during which she coughed up blood and turned up her eyes in agony. Her parents thought it was the end. But Nora passed the crisis and, from then on, suffered no more fits. She became healthier. It looked as if the poor, thin, homely child had, after all, a fairy godmother to take care of her. It must be a funny sort of fairy godmother because when this fairy godmother grants a blessing she always mixes a heap of trouble with the good fortune.

Little Nora loved school, even if the other children teased her about her dark complexion. "Negra, Negra, Nora Negra!" they chanted. But Nora showed them by winning first honors year after year, from first to fifth grade. She played house with the girls, marbles with the boys. But what she liked to do best of all was play school. She would gather the tots in her neighborhood and make them sit in rows like in school. Then she taught them like the teachers did in school. "When I grow up," she told herself, "I'll be a teacher."

Her eldest brother had joined the army and was stationed at Nichols. "Send Nora here," he wrote his parents, "and she can study at the camp school and stay with Auntie Belén. I'll take care of her expenses."

Auntie Belén, a sister of Nora's mother agreed to board Nora. So, during Grade III, Nora stayed with the Aunors, her auntie's family. Then her brother was transferred to Batangas and Nora went back to Iriga. She had had a year of city life.

In the sixth grade Nora did not win first honors. She had become a movie fan, especially of Susan Roces movies, and a pop-music addict, especially of Timi Yuro songs. Now, from the time she woke up in the morning, she was singing. And all day long she was singing — or so it seemed to her family. When she went on to high school she was thinking she wanted to be a lawyer. Though they were so poor, her father and mother were determined that their children should have at least a high-school education. "It's all we can give you," they told their children. But, often, they didn't know where to get the money for fees.

Nora was in first year high when there was this problem about the tuition for her elder sister, who was in fourth year.

"Mamay," said Nora to her mother, "they're having the Darigold Jamboree in Naga. I could go there and join the contest. If I win, there would be money for Ate's tuition."

"But what would you wear, child? All the contestants will be dressed up."

"Maybe any dress will do."

"No child — but I know what we can do."

Nora's mother bought a second-hand dress. She remodeled it to Nora's figure and added frills. A family friend was persuaded to take Nora along to Naga. Nora felt very little when she saw the other contestants. They were all grown-up, good-looking and well-dressed. She was the only child, just 12 years old, and wearing a second-hand dress. The crowd looked very big. But she thought

of the money needed at home and she forced herself to be brave as she went onstage to face her first real public. The song she sang was *You and the Night and the Music*.

The contest was being broadcast all over Bicolandia. Nora's family didn't have a radio, but they went to a neighbor's house to listen to the radio there. They felt tense and nervous. Then they heard Nora being proclaimed the winner. Nora's sister jumped with joy. Late that night Nora arrived and gave her mother the twenty pesos that was her prize. It was exactly the amount needed for her sister's tuition.

Nora's win didn't change her life. She didn't turn into a swan overnight. Indeed her success in Naga only sharpened the gibes in Iriga at the ugly duckling.

One night it was long past suppertime but Nora's father still hadn't arrived with the money for supper. Nora's mother asked her elder children to see if they could get rice on credit from one of the neighborhood stores. The elder children said they were ashamed to ask for credit when the family was already so in debt to those stores. Their mother scolded them but she said they would rather go hungry. Everybody was shouting or crying. "I'll go, Mamay," said Nora, just to bring on peace.

The first store she went to was being minded at the moment by the storekeeper's daughter.

"Why, it's Nora. What do you want, Nora?"

Nora said could they please give her some rice on credit.

"Credit again! Your family owes us so much already. No more credit! Why don't you go to Naga and sing in another contest. Maybe you'll win again and have the money to pay us."

Nora walked away cringing with shame.

At the next store the jeers were even cruder.

"Oh, look who's coming. Negra, Nora Negra! Have

you come to show off your skill in singing, Nora?"

Nora said no, she had come for some rice, please, on credit.

"Oh, so you have come to ask for credit again. And we thought you were going to brag about your winning in Naga. Sorry, Nora, no credit. You sing somewhere else."

Poor Nora was on the point of tears.

At the third store, after much pleading, she was given rice on credit. Hurrying home, she stumbled and fell, and spilled some of the rice. When she reached home, her mother scuffed and pinched her for spilling the rice. The weeping child wondered if her win in Naga was to bring her nothing but hurts.

But when the Liberty Big Show was held in Naga, Nora was there again, as contestant. And again she won over the field.

THAT DECEMBER, Nora's mother was at Nichols, visiting with her sister and their mother. One night they were watching an amateur contest on TV. They fell to talking about Nora's two wins in Naga. Maybe Nora should come to Manila and try out for one of the radio or TV singing contests, said Belen Aunor. But her soldier husband said that would mean a lot of expenses; the money were better spent on the child's education. Just the same, the three women — the two sisters and their mother — secretly arranged to bring Nora to Nichols.

It was Christmas vacation when Nora came to Manila. Her mother didn't feel up to taking her around to the studios; so her Auntie Belén offered to accompany Nora while she applied for auditions. Her aunt would pose as her mother or guardian and introduce her as Nora Aunor. Nora herself didn't want to use her real name. "Because I might flop in Manila," she said, "and that would be embarrassing after I had been a winner in Naga."

Nora was accepted as contestant on the Darigold Bulilit Show. Nora won her first week out and she stayed undefeated champion week after week. This posed a problem. The Christmas vacation was over; she had to go back to school in Iriga. Her Auntie Belén proposed that Nora be transferred to a school in Manila, so she could stay with the Bulilit Show. Nora's mother went back to Iriga to arrange the school transfer. Nora was enrolled at Centro Escolar. She would study there for three years, but her high-school credits are still incomplete.

Nora topped the Darigold Bulilit for 14 weeks. Then she retired undefeated champion.

The weeks on Bulilit were invaluable to Nora. Pianist Romy San Mateo saw that here was talent and he took time out to train the little girl in diction, timing, gesture, expression, and the proper choice of songs. He had an apt pupil.

The next goal was Tawag ng Tanghalan. For amateur singers, that's the Big Spot. Nora wasn't too nervous the first time she competed on Tawag. If she won, good. If not, she wouldn't really have lost anything. She won first prize. But the following week she got the jitters. Now she was the champion, now she had something to lose. When she went on to sing, she stuttered from nervousness. She got a line wrong. She lost.

This was when Nora showed she had the makings of a champion. She had been knocked out but she refused to stay down. She was determined to go back to Tawag and win again. She rehearsed song after song, her Auntie Belén accompanying her on the guitar. She worked on her enunciation. She sang for free anywhere she was asked, to gain stage experience and conquer her fear of crowds and audiences. When she felt she was ready she applied again on Tawag. And she was given another chance.

Her mother came to Manila and sewed her a new dress, for her second try on Tawag. Already she was a bit known as the poor little girl from the masses whose father was a porter, whose family was so hard up, whose childhood had been so grim. The poor folk, the common folk, crowded round the radio and TV that night their little girl sang — and she sang to them and about them. She sang *People*. Nora was singing of her own kind: all the poor people who have nothing but each other. So they need one another and that's why they're really lucky people and very special persons. They know that the opposite of love is not hate but loneliness. When Nora sang, a number of people felt less lonely. They had Nora.

It wasn't just an amateur contest that Nora won that night; she won people.

Nora was a 14-week winner on Tawag, an undefeated champion. And she crowned her career on Tawag by topping the grand finals. She bagged the year's trophy, A TV set, and ₱200 in cash.

The child said good-bye to the amateur. It was 1967; she was 14, when she turned professional. From Tawag she moved on to Oras ng Ligaya and Operetang Putol-Putol. Her influences ranged from Streisand to Nancy Wilson, but a Nora style was developing. Whether belting out a hot number or crooning a kundiman, the Aunor voice identified itself by a certain huskiness of tone, quite remarkable in so young a girl. The Aunor voice has never been particularly young-girlish. Even at 14, when she pitched it low, the effect was smoky torch. Her teenage fans say that what they like about Nora's voice is that "it can do anything, wild or sweet." But it's in the heart-break songs that the throat really comes through — and the sound is all woman. Nora says she feels most like singing when she's singing a ballad.

Alpha Records took a chance on the young singer and waxed the first Nora disc. It flopped. Alpha tried again and the second Nora recording did better. Since then, Nora's Golden Voice LP's have been runaway best-sellers.

Inevitably, the movies beckoned. Dr. José Pérez of Sampaguita sent comedian Germán Moreno to ask Nora if she would like to try the movies. Nora wondered if this was a joke but she also wondered how she would look in the movies. Nobody her type had yet been tapped for glamour roles or sweetheart parts. Curious, Nora decided to say yes to Doc Pérez. Anyway she felt sure she would be used mostly as a singer.

She made her movie debut in Sampaguita's *All Over The World*. She was in the musical numbers. This was followed by "guest" appearances in nine other pictures from the Pérez studios during '67 and '68. By the beginning of 1969, Doc Pérez had promoted her to feature billing. *Young Girl* first featured her with Tirso Cruz III. Nora also branched out as freelancer. She and Tirso did *Banda 24* for Barangay, *Oh Delilah* for JBC, and Nora appeared in two LEA pictures, *Pabandying Bandyng* and *Adriana*. She was on a non-exclusive contract with the Pérezes.

Then she met director Artemio Marquez and he offered to star her in a picture for Tower Productions. "I wanted to know," says Nora, "if a movie starring me would click." The picture, *D'Musical Teenage Idols* (late 1969), which co-starred Tirso Cruz, demonstrated beyond all fiscal doubt that Nora — or the Nora-Tirso team — was top box-office.

At last Nora was a movie star.

But that fairy godmother of her was still goofing, mixing up joy and sorrow. Nora had been two years with

Auntie Belén and Uncle Carlos Aunor when a long-brewing domestic trouble came to a boil.

THE BRAWL was rather embroiled, but here's how Nora's mother tells it.

When Timi Yuro was last in Manila, Nora was part of her show at the coliseum. Nora met her childhood idol and Timi was impressed by the young singer.

All of a sudden Nora and her Auntie Belén showed up in Iriga. Mrs. Aunor told Nora's mother that Timi Yuro had taken a fancy to Nora and wanted to take the girl to the United States; Timi Yuro felt sure that Nora would click there. Timi Yuro's mother also liked Nora very much and wanted to know if she could adopt the girl. That was why Nora and her Auntie Belén had flown to Iriga, to tell Nora's parents of the offer.

Nora's father and mother said they could not let Nora go to America; the girl was too young to be separated from her family. And letting Timi Yuro's mother adopt Nora was, of course, out of the question. Mrs. Aunor said that Timi Yuro and her mother were very insistent and might not take no for an answer. Maybe, just to stop them, there should be a document showing that Nora could not be adopted because her aunt and uncle, the Aunors, had already adopted her.

A lawyer that Nora's mother hurriedly consulted advised against signing such a document. But Mrs. Aunor said it would be merely a paper to show to Timi Yuro. Anyway, added the lawyer, such a paper would have no legal value; no child could be adopted if both its parents were living.

So, Nora's mother signed the paper that was supposed to be only a pretense that the Aunors had adopted Nora.

Late last year, after Nora went to work for Tower

Productions, she began to feel she should be with her own folks. She had been living with the Aunors for two years and she felt unhappy about her family not being together. She was in Manila, her eldest brother was in the army, her parents were in the province.

"One reason I felt happy about earning more," says Nora now, "was that I could bring my family together."

When her mother came to visit, Nora told her about wanting to bring all the family to Manila, so they could be reunited. They could rent a house; the youngest boy could go to school in the city. Nora's mother told Mrs. Aunor about Nora's plan. Mrs. Aunor said why rent a house when they could all live together in the Aunor house. But Nora's mother didn't think this was a good arrangement: two families under one roof. It would be better, as Nora wished, to get a separate house for her folks.

Mrs. Aunor, according to Nora's mother, then declared that Nora could not be taken away from the Aunors because they were her legal guardians, they had adopted Nora, and they had the document to prove it: the paper signed by Nora's mother. This provoked a scene. There were angry words and bitter recriminations. Nora cried that if she was to be the object of dispute she would rather give up her career and just go back to Iriga. In the end she and her mother walked out of the Aunor house.

They rented an apartment in Cubao. Nora's brothers and elder sister joined them there. But her father would not leave Iriga.

One day, her mother accompanied Nora to an appearance on Fiesta Extravaganza. Nora seated her mother in a corner of the room. "You just stay there, Mamay," said Nora. Then she went off. Presently she came back with her

Auntie Belén, who she seated beside her mother. "Now, you two watch the show from there," said Nora, with her impish smile. And off she went to do her number, leaving her mother and her auntie sitting side by side. The sisters at first didn't speak a word. Then their eyes met. On the instant they burst into tears and fell into each other's arms.

The reconciliation of the two families is not yet complete, but Nora won't stop until she has reestablished harmony between her two matrons: the Mamay she loves so much and the auntie to whom she owes so much.

HER STARRERS for Tower Productions, smash hits at the box-office, have turned Nora into a superstar, *the* superstar of the moment. She has broken the color line in Philippine movies, where the rule used to be that heroines must be fair of skin and chiseled of profile. Though neither fair nor statuesque, Nora has bloomed into a beauty all the more fascinating because it's not standard. Seen close up, her complexion shows fine gold tints, her features reveal a delicacy of outline, and her large liquid eyes are lovely. Her speaking voice is soft but always sounds full of emotion, even if she's only asking you to sit down. Nobody who has been watching the local trend towards sexy and ever sexier stars would have predicted that the next pop goddess to dominate the scene would be a simple demure country girl.

Under the tutelage of director Artemio Marquez, Nora is also developing into quite an actress. She has poise, she moves naturally, she underplays rather than mugs. Best of all, she's one local performer who knows how to react. A person present is mentioned in the dia-

logue and her eyes automatically turn towards that person; or the ghost of a smile will flicker on her lips at certain words of somebody else's lines. She seems to be really listening to the dialogue, to be paying attention to what's happening on-scene. Good acting is fifty per cent reacting. It seems to be instinctive in Nora. The stories she appears in are mostly foolish and fantastic, but hers is always a real presence, the impact of a live person. In one movie that had elves in it, she played a cripple hobbling about on a crutch, and because you could believe she was really a cripple you could almost believe in the elves too.

True to form, her fairy godmother has seen to it that superstardom is a mixed blessing. If Nora misses an appointment with the press, word goes around at once that she has turned prima donna. Nobody bothers to check if an afternoon shooting has lengthened into an all-night stand. Those close to her say that the girl's working schedule is so tight that when she gets some free time she simply escapes.

The biggest headache that superstardom has brought her is the war of the fans over her supposed love life.

The names of three boys have been linked with Nora's. When she started out as a professional, she appeared on several radio and TV shows with Edgar Mortiz, and Edgar was said to be her first love, though both of them were, at the time, hardly into their teens. Then when she went into the movies she was paired with Tirso Cruz III. Box-office considerations were undoubtedly behind the campaign to project a Nora-Tirso romance, but what began as publicity may have evolved into, at least, a puppy-love affair. The consensus seems to be that Tirso wasn't aggressive enough. When Nora became a star at

Tower she got a new leading man, Manny de León. Again a romance was drummed up by the publicity department — but young Manny is the assertive type. The talk is that Nora was at first annoyed by the brash way he pushed himself in between her and Tirso; then she became rather charmed by the brashness, the quality that's said to be missing in her other leading man.

Be that as it may, the rivalry has even her family taking sides. Her mother likes Manny for being so on the go; her elder sister thinks Tirso is the finer gentleman. The fans have split into two camps, Nora-Tirso versus Nora-Manny, and the war between the camps is for real. The Nora-Tirso camp bought that doll, María Teresa Leonora, for Nora; when they felt that Nora had broken off with Tirso they reclaimed the doll, handed it to Tirso. The Nora-Manny camp will go to see any Nora movie, even if Tirso is in it — “but we watch only Nora, not Tirso.” Maybe they close one eye.

For Nora herself, the war has brought private anguish. Her mother says that one night the girl came home in tears.

“Mamay, they're saying that Tirso has had me and now Manny is having me! Would they like a doctor's certification? If there's so much malice in this business, maybe I should quit. We could go back to Iriga and I'd just do recordings. Oh, I'm glad my next role is a tomboy!”

Nora says that Tirso is just a good friend, Manny is just a good friend, and: “I don't think I'll fall in love and marry until I'm 25.”

And she's only 17 now.

THE GOLDEN GIRL is now priced at P35,000 a picture and she's doing them at the rate of two pictures a month.

As an advance on pictures yet to be made, director Artemio Marquez has given her a ₱260,000 house in White Plains, just behind Camp Aguinaldo. The house is on a 400-square-meter split-level lot, apparently once steep hillside. On the street level is the garage; Nora keeps an Opel Kadett. Up above the street is a terrace and the two-story house, ample balconies running around the upper story. Though brand-new, the house already shows signs of wear and tear. The tiles of the flooring have swollen or flared up in places.

Nora moved in last April, celebrated her 17th birthday in her new house. Her sister says that Manny de León is a frequent guest but that Tirso has yet to come visiting at the new address. Nora's mother, sister and two brothers live with her. Her soldier brother has left the army and married, now commutes between Manila and Iriga, where Nora has built a new house for her father and bought him a rice field. The old man still prefers to stay in the province.

Nora's mother says that when Doc Pérez scheduled the shooting of *Young At Heart* at Expo '70, she agreed to the trip, then sent word to her husband that she and Nora were leaving for Japan. Before she knew it, the old man was in Manila, in a rage. Why was he not consulted? Was he a nothing now in the family? They just went ahead and made decisions without telling him. But now he would have to assert his authority, because he didn't want his wife or his daughter to go out of the country. What if anything should happen to them so far away? Nora's mother had to go to Doc Pérez, to beg off from the trip. *Young At Heart* was shot in Manila.

That's the story with which the family counters the rumor that Nora refused to go to Japan because it would

have meant making a trip with Tirso.

Says Nora: "There's no truth to that."

For the present, movies apart, her chief concern is to find the time to finish high school. She still lacks a few fourth-year credits.

"Then maybe I'll take up foreign service."

Being in the movies was exciting but exhausting.

"Too many problems! But I'm happy because I have brought my family together and now we have a house and a car of our own and I have been able to build my father a house and give him a farm of his own."

No, none of the big stars high-hatted her when she was an unknown.

"I appeared in a movie of Susan Roces and the next time we met she still remembered me. They have all been so nice."

When she first went to Sampaguita she was supposed to be screen-tested first, but Doc Pérez ruled that she didn't need a screen test. Buddy de Vera of Alpha was laughed at when he took a chance on the first Nora recording, but Euddy was for giving the little girl a break. And director Artemio Marquez was warned he would lose his shirt when he first starred Nora in a picture. The director had told the pessimists: "Well, it's not your money I'll lose." Afterwards they had to swallow their words about Nora not being movie-star material.

Nora doesn't think she has changed in any basic way. She is still sometimes seized by shyness, often still feels nervous when she starts work on a new movie. She still loves Bicol kari and guinatan, and simple clothes in pastel hues. She won't put on a micromini.

"I want my fans to know that I won't change towards

them. I would not be where I am except for them and the people who gave me a break. But I also ask my fans not to change towards me. And, please, stop fighting over Tirso and Manny! They are both my good friends.”

Last summer, her shooting schedules took Nora to Iriga. It was her first homecoming since she became a superstar. The town turned out to meet her. The railroad station where her father had worked as porter was jam-packed. When her train came in, the people who mobbed it almost got run over. When she went to visit her old house, the crowd that followed smashed down the bamboo fences behind which she had played school as a child. At a party for the Local Girl Who Made Good, she saw faces that brought back the days of the ugly-duckling Negra. One face brought back the memory of that night when she had gone out to beg for rice on credit and was told by the storekeeper's daughter to go sing in Naga. Now here was the storekeeper's daughter pushing eagerly through the crowd to say hello to the Golden Girl.

Success had never tasted sweeter.