

Amigo the Movie

If you are a Filipino, or an American with even just a passing interest in Philippine history then you need to see this movie. Set in the Philippines at the turn of the 20th century, the United States was occupying the archipelago after the truncated Spanish-American war. It has now become the Philippine-American war. The conflict is referred to in history books as an “insurrection” but that is beginning to change; now rightfully calling it a war. The war is going badly for General Emilio Aguinaldo, the head of the Philippine Republic, which he proclaimed a Republic in 1898. He is fighting a guerrilla war.

A platoon of American soldiers led by Lt. Compton has come to occupy the *barrio* or village of San Isidro. The barrio is headed by a *Kapitan del Barrio* named Rafael. Along with his beautiful wife Corazon, they lead a somewhat privileged life, not having to go knee deep in muck to plow the paddies and plant rice. The rest of the villagers do the hard work. When confronted by the lieutenant, he answers meekly “*soy un amigo*” or I am a friend. Rafael’s life is compounded by the fact that the leader of the guerrillas is his brother Simon. Rafael is expected to help the guerrillas but at the same time the Americans expect him to be loyal to the new regime. Making it even more painful is his very young son Joaquinito sneaking off to join Simon.

Rafael only wants his village to be left in peace. But events go downhill from the first encounter. The American soldiers are ordered to ring the barrio with barbed wire. Anyone caught outside the perimeter would be shot. (Does this sound familiar? Think pacification in Vietnam.) The *carabaos* or water buffalos are slaughtered by the soldiers. Everyone is to work the fields – including Rafael and Corazon.

A Spanish friar named Fr. Hidalgo ministers to the village’s spiritual needs but was also the ultimate authority until the Americans came. Played by Cuban born American actor Yul Vasquez, I really liked his performance. He is the translator, going from English to Tagalog to some Spanish and conducting prayers in Latin. His Tagalog is clear and credible, something you would imagine hearing from a transplanted Spaniard. Fr. Hidalgo is at times condescending, sometimes dictatorial and arrogant with glimpses of compassion. Friars are villains in Philippine history but Hidalgo’s role is balanced. His character is not loveable but he certainly is not a villain.

Everything quiets down and Compton does his part to “win hearts and minds.” The villagers ask Lt. Compton to allow them to celebrate the *fiesta* or feast of San Isidro, the patron saint of farmers. Fr. Hidalgo describes the celebration to Compton as “part religious and part profane.” Compton acquiesces. The celebration comes with slaughtering of a pig, barbecue on a stick, a brass band, a procession with San Isidro’s statue and *tuba* or palm liquor. When Fr. Hidalgo informs Compton that the brass band is playing the *insurrectos* anthem, Compton dutifully stands and takes off his hat. There are hilarious scenes where the young soldiers are wasted on *tuba*. There is even a cockfight, which is a grudge match between two elderly villagers. 110 years later all this is exactly what we would see in the barrios now except that there wouldn’t be any Americans.

The commanding colonel named Hardacre returns to the barrio the morning after the *fiesta*, passing the sentries sleeping off the *tuba*. He wonders why the guerrillas haven’t attacked San Isidro while attacking other village outposts and suspects that Rafael is working with the *insurrectos*. He also asks Lt. Compton why he is cozying up to the villagers. The lieutenant answers “I have to live with these people” to which the colonel answers “I don’t want you to live with these people, I want you to make war on them.” He

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orders the waterboarding of Rafael who finally agrees to lead the platoon to the guerilla hideout. He takes a circuitous route to nowhere, exhausting the Americans. They finally give up and return to San Isidro dragging a tied up Rafael. The soldiers then sing a ditty popular during the war.

*Damn damn damn the Filipinos
In that land of dopy dreams, happy peaceful Philippines,
Where the bolo-man is hiking night and day;
Where Tagalogs steal and lie, where Americanos die,
There you hear the soldiers sing this evening lay*

*Damn, damn, damn the Filipinos, cross-eyed kakiack ladrones,
Underneath our starry flag, civilize 'em with a Krag,
And return us to our own beloved homes.*

Before reaching San Isidro the platoon is ambushed by the guerrillas. The firefight is not decisive. The soldiers return to the barrio. The colonel is furious at having to suffer some casualties and about the guerrillas getting away. He believes they were set up and Rafael is sentenced to hang. I'll stop here and not tell the rest of the story in order not to spoil it.

Bravo to all the actors, American and Filipino, but most of all to director John Sayles who brought this story to the screen. He is the independent director you never heard of. He spared no detail and unlike Hollywood movies about the Philippines he creates no artificial relationships and no romantic plots. He uses Filipino actors and not made up Hollywood types. I've seen a movie where Anthony Quinn once played a Filipino guerrilla. Obviously Quinn wasn't a Filipino. The dialogue among Filipinos is exclusively Tagalog with English subtitles. Their words are the beautiful Tagalog of old with no *Taglish*. The movie was filmed on the island of Bohol which Val and I visited in 2008. You can close your eyes and the enduring landscape is unchanged in 100 years.

You might think I'm trying to dredge up old wounds. It is important to place everything in historical context. The war ended with the capture of Aguinaldo in April of 1901, betrayed by Filipino scouts working for the Americans. But less than six months later, the USS Thomas arrived in Manila with five hundred teachers who starting fanning out to establish a universal educational system and teach. Two years later, in 1903, the first of several hundred young Filipinos were sent to the United States to be educated in universities in the Midwest and East. They were called "*pensionados*". My father was one of them.