

Actors and Beauty Contests

Moviegoers in the postwar Philippines were typically split along economic lines. I suspect this is still the case today. The middle class went to Hollywood movies. Those were the heydays of MGM, Warner, Columbia and 20th Century Fox. For animation, it was Disney and Looney Tunes. On the other hand, Tagalog movies were for the “*bakya*” crowd. It is a derogatory reference, *bakya* being the wooden clog worn by domestics and laborers. They are cheap and durable, but can be attractive, intricately carved on the sides, with colorful straps. You don’t see much of it nowadays, the footwear of choice having switched to flip flops and sneakers.

At least in Manila, theaters showing American made movies far outnumbered those showing Tagalog movies. I say Tagalog because movies made in other languages such as Cebuano were a tiny minority, which were rarely shown in Manila. From early on, Filipinos were bombarded by Hollywood’s version of history. World War II? “Sands of Iwo Jima” and “Back to Bataan,” both with John Wayne. The latter movie even had an Andres Bonifacio Jr. character. The writers were not fazed by the fact that Bonifacio, who started the armed revolt against Spain, had no such son. The Bible and religion? “The Ten Commandments” and “Samson and Delilah.” History of the U.S. West? “High Noon” and “How the West was Won.” Fortunately, we learned real history from the Benedictine monks at my school.

One of the ironies of Philippine movies is that Tagalog film stars of yesteryears were usually of mixed heritage, with one Caucasian parent, either European or American. Typically taller and fair skinned, they were quite different from their movie fans. A couple of actresses who gained popularity before the war were Carmen Rosales and Paraluman (she went with only one name). They continued their careers well into the postwar era before being overshadowed by the new stars. Carmen Rosales had an American father. Paraluman’s real name was Sigrid von Giese, her father being German. In the 1950s, a new bevy of actresses entered the picture. Gloria Romero’s career spanned six decades. Her mother was an American. With her alabaster complexion and almond eyes, Nida Blanca looked more Japanese than Filipino. But in fact she was born Dorothy Jones, to an American father. Susan Roces had a fruit cocktail heritage, having French, American, Spanish and Chinese ancestry. Ms. Roces would marry another actor, Fernando Poe Jr.

Among the male movie stars, it was no different. Fernando Poe Sr. and Jr. were popular actors, the elder with a career spanning from the late 30’s until his untimely passing at age 37, in 1951. Sr.’s father was from Spain. He married an Irish-American, the mother of his son Fernando Poe Jr. Mario Montenegro was once called the Brown Adonis, but his mother was French. There are exceptions of course, the most notable being Leopoldo Salcedo, who had a very dark complexion.

Another irony is that the mixed heritage actors spoke more fluent and proper Tagalog than most of the population, rich or poor. The writers and directors used Tagalog with correct grammar and vocabulary. No Taglish then. Most of today’s actors are no longer of the mixed heritage we had in the past. Actors, especially the men, have morphed into another profession - politics! There isn’t enough space to enumerate the actors and other entertainers who have transitioned from acting

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into politics. Is there a difference?

I got to see a lot of movies, both Hollywood and Tagalog. I went to American movies with my father, describing my experience in a previous essay. Tagalog movies were compliments of my brother, who was working at the Philippine National Bank. Someone gave him free passes regularly. No one in our household was interested in seeing Tagalog movies, except me and one of our help. Nicknamed Valing (from Valeriana), she was part cook and part housekeeper. If any of my friends had seen me going to the movies with one of the help, I would have been teased mercilessly. Later on Valing helped care for my parents during the last years of their lives. My sister Charito was able to place Valing in a Catholic home when she became incapacitated.

I'd like to know if there is any country out there who love beauty contests more than Filipinos. Aside from the Miss America pageant, most Americans wouldn't know of any other contests. But to Filipinos, beauty contests are important news, right up there with climate change and the continuing territorial row with China. There is more than one Miss Philippines. There's one who goes to Miss Universe and another to Miss World. Progress, or lack thereof, of the Filipina entrants, is reported regularly. It is almost like reporting from the Olympics.

Miss World, Miss Universe, Miss Earth and Miss International. They're the Big Four, the Majors of beauty contests. Ever heard of Miss Supranational? How about Miss Grand International? What's the difference between International and Grand International? What's supranational, something like the United Nations? Want more? There's Miss Tourism International and Miss Tourism Queen International. The Philippines is not one to waste a beauty contest. A separate contest is held to choose the representative of each pageant. There is no lack of sponsors. The country takes great pride in pointing out that a Filipina has won each of the Big Four plus Miss Supranational, the first country to win all five. But the proliferation of titles reminds of me boxing, with all the weight classes and governing bodies.

Every province and every town has a beauty contest. The Orosa home province of Batangas calls for a "Mutya ng Batangas," mutya meaning pearl. Some towns not only have a Miss (you name the province), but also a Miss Teen as well. Next will be a Mrs. or a Lola (grandma) beauty contest.

There's a lot of Filipinos in the U.S., right? Therefore Filipino Americans need a beauty contest, for Miss Philippines USA! They are looking for contestants with the following qualifications, as stated in the pageant website; "*must be of Filipino-descent, 18-25 years of age, at least 5' 2" in height and of good moral character.*" Wonder how they check the character part. If you know someone, there's plenty of time for the next contest, a year from now. Too bad my granddaughter is too young. Wonder what they'll think of her red hair.

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