

At Last, Filipino Cinema in Portugal
July 10, 2013/ Tiago Gutierrez Marques



A scene from Brillante Mendoza's "Captive" (Source: filmfilia.com)

I didn't know anything about Filipino cinema until very recently, as it's practically unheard of in Portugal where most people don't even know where the Philippines is on the world map. But there are signs of change.

In 2010 a Portuguese cultural association called "Zero em Comportamento" (Zero Behavior), which is dedicated to the dissemination of movies that fall outside the mainstream commercial cinema, organized a four-day retrospective showing in Lisbon of movies directed by acclaimed Filipino director Brillante Mendoza. This also included a masterclass on independent filmmaking in the Philippines, for cinema students and professionals (<http://zeroemcomportamento.wordpress.com/arquivo/bmendoza/>).

This rare opportunity got me very excited, and particularly my Portuguese father, who went to see almost all of the eight movies. At the end of each showing, the audience could directly ask Brillante Mendoza their questions.

And just a few months ago, one of Mendoza's latest films, "Captive," was released in commercial theaters in Lisbon and Porto (Portugal's second city) alongside the usual Hollywood blockbusters. I couldn't believe that we had reached a new milestone for Filipino cinema in Portugal.



*Director Brillante Mendoza won the Palme d'Or at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival for "Kinatay."
(Source: Bauer Griffin)*

"Captive" is about the kidnapping of a group of tourists by the fearsome Abu Sayaf group from a resort in Honda Bay, in Palawan. They are taken to Mindanao. Some hostages are killed by the terrorists, while others endure a long period of captivity before finally being saved by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) following a violent shootout. The movie is based on real events that took place in 2001. One of the hostages, a Christian missionary named Gracia Burnham whose husband died during the AFP's rescue operations, published a book about the kidnapping.

I was very eager to watch the movie. I had participated in medical missions in Palawan and met many military officers based at the AFP Western Command headquarters in Puerto Princesa. At first glance, the movie sounds like bad international publicity for an island that's being hailed as an ultimate travel destination. But considering that Portugal is going through an enormous financial crisis, and few people have the chance to travel to the Philippines, I believe that's a small price to pay for the exposure that Filipino cinema will get in Portugal and other European countries.

"Mendoza's latest films have caused furor in European film festivals."

Moreover, the Muslim insurgency in Mindanao is a largely overlooked outside the Philippines, and it is not possible to understand global terrorism if one isn't aware of the conflicts triggered by rebel and terrorist groups in Southern Philippines. After all, terrorists from all over the world are known to have trained in Mindanao. I also think it's not possible to understand contemporary Southeast Asian geopolitics without understanding the geography of the Philippines. The recent

tensions in the West Philippine sea with neighboring nations due to the strategic importance of the natural resources are centered just off the western coast of Palawan.

I suspect "Captive" got in the commercial circuit in Portugal because it is a European and Filipino co-production. Also, its main character is played by French actress Isabelle Huppert, who is very well known in Portugal, particularly after the European film "The Piano Teacher (La Pianiste)" in 2001.



Theater room number 10 at UCI Cinemas in Lisbon, where "Captive" was shown. (Photo by Tiago Villanueva)

Mendoza's latest films have caused furor in European film festivals. "Captive" was nominated for an award at the Berlin international film festival. "Thy Womb," featuring Pinoy superstars Nora Aunor and Bembol Roco, won several awards at the 2012 Venice International Film Festival. "Thy Womb" was also recently shown in Portugal. Unlike "Captive," the movie has no European or non-Filipino actors in it.

Even if many viewers have never heard of the Philippines and may miss out on some of the nuances of "Captive," most people can relate to it since it is about a kidnapping by a group of terrorists. There could be similar movies in many other volatile parts of the world. Think, for instance, of "Forces Spéciales," a recent French film about the kidnapping of a French journalist (played by German actress Diane Kruger) in Afghanistan by Taliban thugs, and the ensuing rescue operation by French Special Forces. Moreover, many Europeans visit Palawan every year.



Nora Aunor in Brillante Mendoza's "Thy Womb," the controversial film that won her several awards, including the 2012 Gawad Urian. (Source: arte-Factos.net)

"Thy Womb," however, is a different story since it focuses on the sea-dwelling Badjao community and the Muslim culture in the remote islands of Tawi-Tawi, in the Sulu sea, close to the Malaysian border. Apart from Tagalog, indigenous languages such as Tausug and Sinama are also spoken in the film. The majority of the Portuguese and European audiences will not be familiar with the intricacies of a poorly known region in a poorly known country. It doesn't help that Western Mindanao has many "do not travel" advisories that have been keeping tourists at bay. I would thus expect "Captive" to be more successful at the box office in Portugal and in other European countries while "Thy Womb" may be more suited to smaller audiences.

Cinema is a powerful tool for public diplomacy in the digital era. One of the great things about Mendoza's films is that they tend to focus on Filipino life and culture that are poorly understood outside the Philippines. As such, the Portuguese audience can benefit from gaining awareness of an Asian culture that has more similarities to their own than any other, but which remains almost unknown here. Portugal is also not well known in the Philippines, so why not show Portuguese films there? For instance, the newly released "Night Train to Lisbon," featuring Jeremy Irons as the main character, was shot in Lisbon and takes the viewer through the Salazar dictatorship, which overlapped for a few years with the Marcos dictatorship.

Source: <http://positivelyfilipino.com/magazine/2013/7/at-last-filipino-cinema-in-portugal>



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