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Atsay (1978)

Review: Atsay

Mario E. Bautista The Philippines Daily Express, 1978

'Atsay': The Maid as Person

Well-acted and done with utmost care, "Atsay" is definitely one of the very few good films of 1978.

The picture begins with the kind of burning, indelible imagery that promises great moviemaking, showing the small funeral procession of Nora's father mournfully winding its way through the verdant fields of a bucolic landscape. Romeo Vitug's camera is properly inert and unobtrusive. Its placements studied and functional, its point of view is of one who seems to be merely eavesdropping on the whole proceedings. This gives the establishing sequences a leisurely beauty permeated by melancholy, which is the tone the film eventually takes for its oppressed heroine.

This is the first time that the local cinema takes a serious, sympathetic look on the lowly domestic help. Housemaids are usually portrayed as brainless sidekicks of the leading lady, often played by the likes of Aruray, Matimtiman Cruz and Matutina. Such a fragile theme showing the exploitation and personal sufferings of an "atsay," could easily have been ground to a pulp, making the film a calculating, manipulating purveyor of tears. But Eddie Garcia is clearly a filmmaker of discretion who knows how to make his character endearing without resorting to schmaltz.

The film may be divided into four fragments. The first portion shows the abject poverty of Nora's family in the province and how she is enticed by Bella Flores, along with some friends, to go to the city with a promise of lucrative jobs for them. Next comes her stay with Angie Ferro, an upstart with four brutish children whose father is working in Iran. In the third segment, Nora works for Armida Siguion-Reyna, a domineering career woman whose henpecked husband, Renato Robles, deflowers Nora. Finally, we see Nora finding love in Ronald Corveau, the bitter ward of an old woman, Mona Liza, who helps Nora when she loses consciousness on the railroad tracks.

This episodic nature of the film robs it of much of its power. Too slack in pacing and too mannered at times, the film runs a long two-and-a-half hours and can easily stand some re-editing. Such scenes showing what happened to Nora's friends in Lilian Laing's cabaret may be pruned without actually damaging the central story. This would also add greater impact to Nora's reunion with Amy Austria, also a "provinciana" who

is transformed into a brazen ago-go dancer with half-a-dozen sugar daddies. The film likewise falters in the final portion involving Corveau as a love interest. It seems to be an altogether different element, but one cannot really fault the film's authors for wanting to give the film a happy ending. It's just that this kind of optimism may entertain false hopes of finding romance and happiness somewhere in all the atsays who would see this film and identify with its leading character. This is also true for the old man who befriends Nora and inexplicably turns up wherever she goes. Wouldn't it be nice if all atsays would have a similar personal guardian angel to protect them from inhuman bosses.

Edgardo Reyes' script succeeds though in showing the various experiences typically encountered by household helps: unruly children who torture helpless servants, wives who treat their pets more humanely than their overworked slaves, husbands who take advantage of their loneliness and are known as atsay-killers. People who have been unkind and inconsiderate to their servants at one time or another may feel uneasy, if not totally guilty, as they watch the film.

Garcia assembled a uniformly first-rate cast from Armida and Angie to the nameless housemaid who befriends Nora. Even Ronald Corveau is less irksome here than in his weekly TV show. Nora Aunor's performance bears the distinct marks of style and self, welding character and personality. As Nelia, the atsay, she delivers a muted performance that successfully treads the thin, delicate line separating genuine sentiment and mawkishness.

Everybody worked hard and it shows. Romeo Vitug's cinematography gives the film a very big boost and George Canseco's musical score, for once knows when to shut up. The first time Eddie Garcia handled a film with a serious theme was in "Mga Anak sa Pagkakasala," an underrated indictment of the injustices illegitimate children go through as society censures them from the sins of their parents. With "Atsay," he renews his credentials as one director to reckon with.