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BONA (1980)

Isagani R. Cruz, TV Times, January 4-10, 1981, also Movie Times

There are several marvelous sequences in Lino Brocka's *Bona* (1980), but the trouble is that these sequences have nothing to do with the story of the film. In fact, the sequences in the film may be roughly classified into those unnecessary ones which are well-done, those necessary ones which are not well-done, those few well-done sequences which is also happens to be necessary.

Take, for example, the scenes showing Nora Aunor going to the neighborhood faucet to get water for her idol Phillip Salvador. The scenes occur again and again in the film, almost like commas in a long, convoluted sentence. Commas, however, serve at least to indicate pauses in thought; the water-fetching sequences serve merely to fill up the gaps in Brocka's imagination. One water sequence is enough, if all Brocka wants to say is that the poor have to spend all their time fetching water from the only running faucet in their neighborhood. The repetition is unnecessary, particularly because the blocking, the design, and the impact of each faucet scene are the same in all the shots. Nothing is gained by repetition.

The best sequences in the film involve Brocka's favorite topic: the life of the poor. In shot after shot, the life of the dispossessed is clearly delineated, from abortion (pre-life) to infancy to adolescence to ultimate death (the funeral scene which, by the way, is a repetition of Brocka's funeral scenes in his earlier films). But the problem is that the life of the poor has nothing to do with the story. Aunor will still have the same psychological problem and experience exactly the same shock at the end if Salvador were middle-class.

It is well and good to depict the life of the poor in our country. But the story should be about the poor. The story of *Bona* is about a rich man, although a rich man in a poor man's clothes. Salvador's motivations are nouveau riche. Particularly incredible as the action of a poor man is his penchant for being bathed by Aunor. (The scene, in fact, appears to be an adaptation of similar scenes in American films, with a batya replacing an American bathtub and a bucket of hot water replacing the hot water faucet.)

When Brocka handles a sequence which is necessary to the narrative, he fails to give it life. For example, crucial to the film is the first scene with Aunor boiling water. Brocka puts his camera in such a position that the viewer cannot see the pot of boiling water. Salvador, in fact, faces the table (and thus faces the right edge of the screen), while Aunor, her back turned to him, faces the invisible stove (and thus faces the left edge of the screen). Their turning their backs to each other may be significant, but only for two seconds. Since the shot is allowed by Brocka to take more than a full minute, the viewer is bored to death.

The only two sequences which are both well-done and necessary are the Raquel Monteza sequence and the final sequence. In one sequence, Aunor fights another woman (Raquel Monteza). The sequence begins inside the house, then spills over to the street. In this sequence, Brocka succeeds in integrating production design with narrative. Aunor, as she is in almost all the sequences, is excellent here. The viewer feels her rage at the challenge to her private world.

The final sequence, where Aunor finally assaults Salvador, is excellent, although it is, of course, in the same vein as *Insiang*. The typical Filipino film thrives on the theme of revenge. *Bona* is no exception. When Aunor finally dumps the boiling water on her non-feeling master, the viewer cannot help but be moved. The sequence is effective, perhaps because the rest of the film is not.

In the end, it is Aunor's acting which saves the film. Despite the incoherent screenplay, the erratic direction, and the irrelevant production design, the film is gripping because Aunor is excellent. Aunor is indeed a signal phenomenon in Philippine film. She broke the color barrier (she is not a mestiza). She broke the marriage barrier (she is not single, nor she is she even happily married). She broke the superstar barrier (before her, superstars were supposed to be beautiful, but not good, actresses). She has now broken the untouchable barrier: in *Bona*, she is subjected to the most degrading physical abuses. Unlike Hilda Koronel who remained a madonna even during the rape scene in *Angela Markado*. Aunor really becomes the penniless, dumb, neurotic alalay *Bona* is supposed to be. Who can imagine Fernando Poe, Jr. beaten to

a pulp by nameless villains? Who can imagine Lloyd Samartino made up to look like a vampire? In *Bona*, Aunor really looks like an alalay, rather than a superstar. That is why she is, in fact, a superstar.