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Ron has sent us more reviews of Nora movies. It's from The Urian Anthology, 1980 - 1989, a Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino collection of movie essays. Urian members, I hope it's okay that I posted the reviews of Nora movies from the book. All Noranians all over the world will be grateful to read the reviews and ultimately, will purchase the book once it is available online. If you want it remove from the website, email me at pinoymovies@yahoo.com and I will remove it immediately. Thank you.

Bona (1980)

SOURCE: The Urian Anthology 1980-1989

REVIEW: Bona

Nestor U. Torre, Philippines Daily Express, 1981

Obsession

“Bona” is a story of obsession, the tragedy of the fan turned fanatic. It delves into what causes an otherwise sensible girl to throw discretion and self-respect to the wind to serve her beloved. In the fan-atical context of Philippine movies, it is a story that needs to be told.

Interestingly, it is told by Director Lino Brocka, who admits to having been a movie fan himself during his childhood years in the province, but who has since eschewed all that hysteria in favor of making substantial movies, most of which have gone against the fan syndrome. Even more tellingly, the title role of the fan is acted by superstar Nora Aunor, who also used to be a movie fan and is now the golden goddess at whose feet of clay the greatest number of the country's fans prostrate themselves.

Clearly, Brocka, Aunor and writer Cenen Ramos know the phenomenon whereof they speak. The intimate knowledge makes for a film that rings true both for the expert in abnormal psychology and for the ga-ga movie fan reliving his dream and high nightmare in the audience.

Movies play an abnormally important part in Philippine life. They offer escape, cheap thrills, and idealized pluperfection, and the trapped, bored, and nondescript citizen laps them up as though they were the perfect alternative to the grossly imperfect reality of his life. In truth, the movies offer no alternative at all, since alternatives must be first real and accessible in order to be viable. The illusion proffered by our movies is ultimately nothing more than sad delusion.

But the diehard fan agrees to be deluded. He is happy to believe the beautiful lies of the cinema, because, by his gnomic standards, a beautiful lie is better than ugly truth of existence. For most fans, this delusion is just a lark, a temporary psychic vacation from the hard facts of living, a pleasant daydream from which he can awaken with no serious hangovers.

For a few, however, the delusion becomes their new reality, and their lives are wrecked by it. They become so totally wrapped up in their film idols that they lose their own sense of self, and self-worth. The idol becomes everything, the fan is reduced to nothing. The name of the psychological game of is obsession.

“Bona” is obsessed, not with a superstar, but with a bit player (Phillip Salvador). Even by movie-fan standards, that’s terribly gauche! Going ga-ga over Christopher de Leon is one thing, but flipping for a mangy bit player is something else again. “Wa” class! But Bona couldn’t care less. In her fantasticating little mind, the bit player is Christopher de Leon, Lito Lapid and Lloyd Samartino combined, with Alfie Anido thrown into the bargain.

To serve him utterly, she braves rain, hunger, the scorn of her “decent” family, the illness and ultimate death of her father, the subsequent anger of her brother, the pain of seeing her idol bedding other women, the ordeal of having to arrange for the abortion of one of the girls he’s so casually impregnated, and the shame of having to “service” him sexually without the slightest reciprocation of love or even gratitude on his part.

In the end, the nasty man announces that he’s leaving the country with his latest and wealthiest inamorata. Bona, who has taken all the shit he’s casually thrown her way, can take no more. She kills the bastard. In the process, she has hopefully killed her insane obsession for him. Or maybe she has also killed herself.

What a story! The film is set in fetid Philippine slum, but it is so strong that it may well have been set in a theater in ancient Greece, where the most powerful and incomprehensible of human emotions rivaled the monumental tantrums of the gods.

There are reports that this film will be sent as the Philippine entry to the Cannes Film Festival. Initially, the story is so “small” that there would seem to be little about it to recommend it to an international audience of critics and jurors. On the other hand, the film’s obsession with obsession reminds us more than a little of Roman Polanski and his “Repulsion” and we remember that was a “small” film too but its obsessive force made a major impact on film experts around the world. The same could be true for Brocka and his “Bona.”

Strangely enough, the best performance in “bona” is turned in, not by Nora Aunor in the title role, but by Phillip Salvador as the bit player who is her idol, her nemesis, and her obsession. Nora is all over the place and gives the role everything she’s got. Indeed, on the afternoon I saw the film, the theater was filled with her fans, and they were shrieking and swooning over her “dramatic highlights.” Nora knows when to be simple, when to be subtle, and when to let go of her emotional stops. She is truly a consummate, intelligent actress, and clearly deserves the praise of critics and the adulation of her fans.

Trouble is, she is too intelligent for her part. Obsession is born of emotional weakness, a psychological vacuum that the idol is idealized into filling. As Aunor portrays her on screen, Bona is too sensible and savvy a woman to make this act of self-delusion plausible.

She is also a mite too old for the role. Granted, there are “diehard” fans in their fifties and sixties, but the character of Bona, as written. Is clearly intended for a young girl (She is supposed to be still a student, for one thing). The character’s innocence would account for much of her naivete, and Nora does manage the Naïve but, but it feels a little forced. On the other hand, the fact that he, too is no longer a spring chicken helps Salvador in his

portrayal of the trying-hard bit player who is destined to be a has-been even before he has been anything at all. His age makes the character even more pathetic. Salvador has a perfect feel for the bit player's braggadocio in public, his private fears, his dimwitted dreams and his casual cruelty. Stardom is his own obsession, and his failure to achieve it consumes him as much as her failure to possess him consumes Bona in the end. I'm surprised that Salvador didn't win the Best Actor award at the Metro Filmfest last month (so what else is new?).

Director Brocka, writer Ramones, and cinematographer Conrado Baltazar work wonders in seeing this slim and deceptively simple story through to its tragic conclusion. From apparently casual events, they fashion a structure of portents and symbols that are evinced not just for artistic show-and-tell but for forceful dramatic force.

As they see it, Bona is fire and the bit player is water, and one must either douse the other or set him or her to a murderous boil. For most of the film, it is Bona who must bank on her fires and drown in the ocean of her idol's needs and ingratitude. In the end, however, fire finally asserts itself, and the bit player's goose is literally cooked (along with the bit player!).

True enough, the ending is much too prolonged and melodramatic for comfort. Obviously, symbols and portents have a way of getting mired in self-importance. And our interest in the film does flag at certain points, when the loose ends prove to be too close for their, and our, own good. But the basic soundness of the film's premise, plus the importance of its theme, particularly in this movie-mad Philippines, sees the film through these rough spots.

Exceptional performances are also turned in by members of the supporting cast---in particular, Venchito Galvez as Bona's father and the ensemble playing the various neighbors and friends in the film's slum setting.

Some people want to know: Why are most of Brocka's films set in the slums? Obviously, these people have mud and proletarian bonhomie coming out of their ears. Well, to each his own consciousness. Fact: there are many slums in the Philippines. Fact: not everything in the Philippines is a slum. Directors react to those two facts as the spirit moves them. Brocka makes films about slums; Fritz Ynfante makes "Forbes"--- who is to say which is "better" for each director, other than the director involved?

Second question: Doesn't Brocka's predilection for slum stories limit him as a director, and make his work repetitive and therefore ultimately predictable and boring? Yes. But tell that to Brocka and he won't be wishing you a Happy New Year. So what? So, nothing. In directing, subjectivity is all. You want Brocka to expand his horizon as a director? He has to want it himself before anything will happen. And that will come, in his own good time.

Final question: "Will 'Bona's' tragic story open the eyes of our movie fans and teach them to be less obsessive?" It doesn't look like it. When I saw the film, the fans around me were suffering every inch the way with Nora, but they were "ecstatically." They saw the film, not as an indictment, but as their apotheosis. Susan Roces has nothing to worry about; for that matter, neither does Nora Aunor.