

# Women Who Err like Men

by Joseph T. Salazar

*Bridal Shower* by Jeffrey Jeturian  
and *Crying Ladies* by Mark Meilly  
2003 Metro Manila Film Festival Entries

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The results of the 2003 Metro Manila Film Festival reflect the maturing tastes of local audiences. Moviegoers showed their growing appreciation for simple productions that invest in scripts with fresh storylines. The filmmakers responsible for these productions exhibited confidence in the stories they wanted to tell, transforming these into memorable cinematic experiences within the dark confines of our neighborhood multiplexes.

Two of the festival's topgrossers during its first few days were *Captain Barbell* and *Fantastic Man*. The strong box office performance of the two films was not unusual, considering the mass appeal of the fantasy genre, where special effects are a big come-on for family oriented audiences. What did come as a surprise was the success of two non-fantasy films, which continued to show even after the festival period, and thus made a point for the evolving tastes of local movie audiences. The two films – *Bridal Shower* and *Crying Ladies* – may not have played to packed audiences on their respective openings, but soon enough they attracted audiences of all classes through the buzz generated by word of mouth. More than this, both managed to do impressively well in movie theaters beside the eagerly awaited last installment of the *Lord of the Rings*.

The unexpected success of these films can largely be attributed to their scripts, which were certainly novel and well-crafted. Both resisted the usual gimmickry of commercial scripts and featured dynamic yet endearing characters, moving within a context that was contemporary and uniquely Pinoy.

*Bridal Shower*, directed by Jeffrey Jeturian and written by Chris Martinez, looks at independent, sophisticated, middle-class women trying desperately to make their love aspirations a reality. They liberate themselves from society's traditional norms, and wrest power from the men surrounding them. In this movie, the men, not the women, are objectified. Despite this "empowering" stance, however, the women are still dependent on feudal notions of love. As such, the film records the subtle nuances that allow Sonia (Francine Prieto), Tates (Dina Bonnevie), and Katie (Cherry Pie Picache) to resolve the contradictions in their lives. Sonia, in desperate need of a father for her unborn baby, finally decides between two lovers. Taking her cue from her social-climbing mother, she chooses Juancho, who is extremely wealthy and makes for the safer and more reliable husband. Unfortunately, he is horrible in bed and is too stuck up to understand Sonia emotionally. With her life secure, Sonia quits her job, falls into the routines of a trophy wife and becomes inaccessible to her friends.

Meanwhile, Tates opts to shell out a huge amount to help her boyfriend Mickey to successfully annul his previous marriage. For her, this should pave the way for the much-awaited marriage proposal. However, her promiscuous past haunts her and Mickey proposes a cool-off period instead. Tates, after surviving a suicide attempt, induces her much-wanted proposal from Mickey who either was absolving himself from guilt, or was avoiding paying her the money she spent on his annulment.

Overweight and needing to be with a man, Katie seeks Joebert, one of the macho dancers at Sonia's bridal shower. Realizing Katie's influence in the field of advertising, he befriends her. Before he could fully take advantage of her, Joebert falls in love with Katie and follows her advice to give up dancing and acquire a squeaky-clean image so that he could try his luck as a commercial model. Before any real relationship could develop between them, however, Joebert borrows 50 thousand pesos from Katie to spend for his ailing father's hospitalization. He disappears, and Katie, worried over losing all that money, tracks him down with the help of the local police in his hometown. She finds him mourning in his father's wake. Realizing that she may have ruined any chance of a relationship with an honest man, Katie distances herself from Joebert. They meet two years later when everything is forgotten, and they rekindle their lost relationship.

Despite a meager production budget and the mediocre performances of its male cast members, *Bridal Shower* manages



(From left) Cherry Pie Picache, Francine Prieto and Dina Bonnevie play the protagonists of *Bridal Shower*.

to strike a chord with many moviegoers. The film features intense female protagonists who have gone up the social ladder through their own enterprise. They earn their own money and crush men's balls when needed. They make decisions that run contrary to society's calibrated expectations. But instead of appearing capricious and irrational, these characters are effectively redefined in the movie so that the moviegoers are able to accept, probably even empathize with, them. The women characters become admirable because the film situates them in a milieu where people are known to look blindly on deceit, blackmail and those dysfunctional actions most of us believe we have to resort to to attain society's ideals of love, marriage and companionship. The film also ingeniously demolishes society's facades, and reconstructs a familiar order where women are brimming with unarticulated desires. The *matronas* play with their dance instructors and the devious female and/or effeminate officemates cover up for the protagonists' follies. Finally, the strength of the female characters comes out more forcefully through the male characters, who are portrayed as men who cannot live up to the expectations of a patriarchal order. They cannot provide for their families, and some – like the macho dancers – do not even believe in educating their children.

The same observations apply to Mark Meilly's *Crying Ladies*. If *Bridal Shower* succeeds in dramatizing the lives of middle-class women who try to keep their relationships, career and power intact, *Crying Ladies* foregrounds the bittersweet struggles of lower class women and the compromises they have to make to survive.

The film revolves around Doray (Hilda Koronel), Choleng (Angel Aquino) and Stella (Sharon Cuneta), who, to make ends meet, agree to become professional mourners for a Chinese family. Doray is an actress past her prime, whose life's defining moment is the film where she played the bit-role of a town lass being stepped on by a giant. She instructs Choleng and Stella on acting methods to enhance their crying, even though she herself resorts to tricks like applying Vicks on her eyes to induce more tears. She is miserable and upset over a career she never had, and forces her daughter to go from one movie audition to another. An old lady mourner who recognizes her at the wake redeems Doray. Later on, her family, friends and neighbors applaud her on a re-run of her much-touted movie on television.

Choleng, the youngest of the crying ladies, sleeps with Ipe, the husband of a friend. She tries to seek forgiveness for her transgression through constant confession and doing work for a religious foundation. Despite her guilt, she is unable to resist Ipe's advances and finds herself waking up beside him in different motel rooms. Eventually getting tired of being Ipe's



(From left) Angel Aquino, Sharon Cuneta and Hilda Koronel play professional mourners in *Crying Ladies*.

toy, Choleng decides she wants more than the secret relations she keeps with him. She is able to muster enough strength to say no to Ipe for the first and last time.

Stella, barely three months out of jail for estafa, scrambles to earn a few thousand pesos to prove to her son Bong that she is in control of her life. Bong will soon be leaving for Cagayan with his father and stepmother, and Stella tries hard to make her son's last few days with her memorable for him. Almost everything she does achieves the opposite. She takes her son along to her unsuccessful auditions for Japanese recruiters. She finds ways to elude paying jeepney fare and justifies it unconvincingly to her son, shouts incoherent prayers to muffle the inappropriate sounds coming from her neighbors, and leaves her son home for work when a fire strikes. With a heavy heart, Stella accepts the reality that her son would have a better future with his father. But she redeems herself in the end as she finally finds a job with the foreign recruiters. She maintains contact with Bong, and proves to him that she has worth in her newly found career as – believe it or not – a videoke model.

If *Bridal Shower* documents the travails of women who seize the power of men, *Crying Ladies* depicts the matter-of-factness of the women who resist it. In a society that glorifies success, Doray is a complete failure and source of disappointment. But instead of looking at that long chain of letdowns that is her entire acting career, she insists on looking at a moment's success. True enough, her spectators – both inside and outside the world of *Crying Ladies* – see a glimpse of that once shining star.

Choleng is neither Mary nor Magdalene. Guilt, virtue or propriety did not affect her decision to stop any illicit affair with Ipe. If he can enter and leave her life as he pleases, why can't she make the same decisions regarding her relationships as well?

Stella eschews all imposed standards of the martyr mother, submissive wife and passive woman. She dismisses particular expectations of women, and only chooses those roles that she can manage. She plays rough when she needs to, and demonstrates compassion and understanding if the situation calls for it. Being a mother to Bong is the one responsibility that she wants to handle but the life that she has led so far seems to show her incapacity for that role. Despite what the movie has dramatized and what her son's father believes, Bong and even the audience would think otherwise.

Overall, *Crying Ladies* gets ahead of *Bridal Shower* in terms of production. Meilly intertwines minute details carefully and does not take anything for granted. The composition of his shots is clean and simple but gets engagingly complicated and innovative in more dramatic moments. The editing is sharp and enhances the film's funny moments. The cut from Doray applying Vicks on her eyes to the three mourners crying in sympathy for the burning sensation Doray feels is just perfect. If it were done later, the joke would have been obvious and predictable.

The cast's acting is impeccable. Sharon Cuneta shows us a range broader than what we usually give her credit for, and Hilda Koronel makes you wonder why you do not see her more often on film or on television.

*Bridal Shower* and *Crying Ladies* prove that our local entertainment industry need not look far in order to generate films that Filipinos can admire and enjoy. The employment of popular *artistas*, a huge budget, the moment's socially relevant themes and gimmicky special effects is useless in the face of mediocre scripts. When plots are poorly conceived, characters are not properly motivated and situations are drawn from imagined realities, the viewers' emotional connection with a story's characters and with the realities it depicts is somehow undermined.

With the exception of Mark Meilly and Jeffrey Jeturian's films, the productions featured in the 2003 Metro Manila Film Festival are generally an appalling lot since the very requirement of telling a good story is again sacrificed in our industry's collective attempt to replicate Hollywood gloss. The success of *Bridal Shower* and *Crying Ladies* should help convince the local movie industry that in order for it to survive the assault of imported films, it would have to create products containing characteristics Hollywood cannot offer. Since it is obvious that we cannot equal Hollywood's budget and technology, we have no choice but to look for simpler, more affordable but reliable alternatives to make local cinema worthy of its audience's hard-earned money.

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