

## In Full Bloom

Roehl L. Jamon

Review of

### *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* (The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros)

Released : 2006  
Producer : ufo Pictures  
Director : Auraeus Solito  
Scriptwriter : Michiko Yamamoto  
Cast : Nathan Lopez, JR Valentin,  
Soliman Cruz, Ping Medina,  
Neil Ryan Sese, Bodjie Pascua



From the title alone, *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* (*The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros*), gives the impression that the film depicts the struggles of a pre-adolescent individual in coming to terms with his homosexuality and its subsequent acceptance in a conservative patriarchal society – a plot commonly observed in local films that have the homosexual as the central character. As a “gay” film, *Ang Pagdadalaga...* seems to be as ordinary as its predecessors, following the usual trajectory gay films take: identity crisis, coming-out-of-the-closet, discrimination, and finding true love, among others.

However, as the film starts, the audience is introduced to Maxi (Nathan Lopez), a 12-year old boy, walking the streets of Manila, greeting and being greeted by neighbors he happens to pass by. We see Maxi cheerful and quite confident about himself in that part of the metropolis as he shows off his make-up, the hair band on his head, and his flirtatious gait as he strides his way home. The community, it seems, has grown accustomed to Maxi and has accepted him for what he really is.

Reaching home, Maxi is greeted by his father Paco (Soliman Cruz) and his two older brothers Boy (Neil Ryan Sese) and Bogs (Ping Medina). Maxi quickly sets the table for lunch, and then we see the family eating at the table together, enjoying each other's company just



Maximo (Nathan Lopez) and Bogs (Ping Medina) in a scene from the movie. (Retrieved May 16, 2006 from <http://maximooliveros.tripod.com/mgapics.htm>)

like any family should be. From their conversations, we see Maxi maintaining his homosexual self, without pretensions, without apprehension. His brothers allude to him as their baby sister, and their father sees Maxi as his only daughter. No conflict so far until Maxi brings home -- or rather, is literally carried home -- by his knight in shining armor.

The initial meeting between Paco and his brood and Lt. Victor Perez (JR Valentin) happens one night when Perez saves Maxi from harassment by neighborhood pranksters. After the incident, Perez carries Maxi all the way home and meets Maxi's grateful yet surprisingly suspicious father and brothers. The stare Paco, Bogs, and Boy gave Perez the moment the latter stepped inside their apartment was rather inappropriate for someone who had just saved Maxi's life. They didn't seem to be happy that a cop was inside their house unannounced, never mind the fact that this cop has just done something good to one of them. Besides, Perez seems to be quite impressive: a new cop on the block -- tall, young, handsome, and full of ideals about law and order. There was really no reason for Maxi's family to suspect Perez as the latter maintains a safe distance from Maxi and his family.

At this point in the film, it becomes noticeable that the filmmakers "seem" to be consciously veering away from the

traditional narratives that portray homosexual characters. The film shifts its focus from Maxi to Perez and reveals a narrative typical of male cinema. Maxi's homosexuality becomes relegated to the background to give way to the more serious problems of the other male characters. After that first meeting, the hostility towards Perez becomes clear. Maxi's family is far from ordinary. Aside from the absence of the a mother figure, the father Paco is revealed as a man involved in robbery, holdup, burglary, and other crimes. Assisting him in this profession are his two older sons Bogs and Boy.

However, no matter how dysfunctional this family might seem, one gets a glimpse of the dynamics of a Filipino family in the absence of a mother figure. Although widowed, Paco proves to be the doting father to Maxi and tolerates, even encourages, his youngest son's homosexuality. In the same vein, Maxi's older siblings act as the responsible big brothers to their much younger "sister". In return, we see Maxi performing stereotypical female roles: doing household chores like setting the table, preparing dinner, doing the laundry, and mending his family's torn clothes.

Complications arise when one night, Boy comes home with blood on his shirt. Maxi sees this but pretends not to mind, and eventually becomes a silent accomplice to his brother's secret. However, police investigations catch up with them, and the cop Perez attempts to persuade Maxi into talking against his family. Soon Maxi faces the dilemma of choosing between protecting his brother's secret or revealing everything he knows to the object of his juvenile attraction. In the end, Maxi's choice decides the outcome of the film.

*Ang Pagdadalaga...* presents a glimpse of several, if not too many, complicated issues that surround contemporary Filipino society. These issues range from the mundane to the more profound by allowing the audience to see slices of life in that small corner of the universe: a drunken musician playing a solitary tune, women and children bathing in the street, a naked gay couple found sleeping on an empty lot, a gay beauty pageant involving Maxi and

his gay friends, corruption in the police institution, and overcrowding in jails, to mention a few. In addition, the grainy, high contrast cinematography also gives the film a raw, even gritty, quality that makes everything seem real.

Despite the connotations of the title, questions arise whether or not *Ang Pagdadalaga...* should be appropriately labeled gay. Several key elements in the film contribute to this uncertainty. These elements include no less than the characters, the setting, and the storyline.

Noticeable in the film is a lack of female characters. Sure there are females in the film: a prostitute who was the object of Boy's interest and a woman who asked Paco for assistance when her husband was being arrested. However, these females provide no significant role in the narrative – they are there simply to complete a tableau presented by the filmmakers. Instead macho males dominate the film: Paco, Bogs, and Boy are members of the underworld and are typical gangsters with gangster motivations. On the other side of the fence is Perez, the police chief referred to only by his title "Hepe" (Bodjie Pascua), and the police institution. It is among these dominant males that Maxi's character is introduced and developed. Compared to these men Maxi's character is without a doubt more feminine than masculine.

As a result, this macho environment creates a stark contrast that emphasizes Maxi's homosexuality, or more accurately, his femininity. We therefore see Maxi as other than the homosexual that he is, but more of the lone female stereotype common in male cinema. He is more than the young member of Paco's family – Maxi is also daughter, sister, wife and mother; and aside from being just a gay character in the film, he is also a helpless victim and lover. Several scenes involving Maxi and the other cast members develop this theme.

In one memorable scene, Maxi wakes up in the middle of the night to find Boy washing his bloodstained shirt. Maxi gets the shirt from his brother and assures him that his secret is safe with him. In another scene one morning, Maxi is alone with his love



Maxi preparing breakfast for Lt. Victor Perez (JR Valentin). (Retrieved May 16, 2006 from <http://maximooliveros.tripod.com/mgapics.htm>)

interest for the first time. While Perez is inside the shower, Maxi peeks at Perez, and having satisfied his curiosity, prepares a hearty breakfast for the ailing cop. Another significant moment is that between Maxi and his father Paco. When the former asks his father why they have to live a complicated life, the latter confesses that he intends to keep his family intact and promises never to let any member of the family die of poverty again. This he articulates tearfully in reference to Maxi's absent mother.

What this implies is that Maxi is no more than the female character missing in the film. Maxi is the lone female to whom all males turn for companionship, advice, guidance, affection, nurturing, and even for strength. The narrative then actually revolves around the men's circumstances while putting Maxi and his homosexuality in the foreground simply as a counterpoint to the otherwise dark themes of the story. This is evident in the narrative, which is actually "about" the struggle between good and evil, the friction between law and order and the criminal world,

and all the varying gradations and versions of morality in between. This is reinforced in the climax when Paco goes alone to a predetermined place to confront his son's accusers and finally settles scores with Perez. At the meeting place, Paco meets Perez along with Hepe, who turns out to be Paco's long-time nemesis. After a brief exchange, Hepe shoots Paco. Quite simultaneously, Maxi arrives on the opposite bank of the river looking for his father, and witnesses all that takes place. In the dialogue following this scene, Perez, in his attempt to reconcile with Maxi tells the latter: "*sa buhay na ito, iba't iba talaga ang klase ng mga tao, may mabubuti at may masasama...*" ("In this life, there are different types of people, some good, some bad..."). To this Maxi replies: "*Oo nga, pero iisa lang ang tatay ko...*" ("Yes but I only have one father...").

Furthermore, the circumstances of the characters around Maxi are typical of male cinema: the classic story of cops and robbers, good vs. bad cops, stealing to feed an impoverished family; not to mention the violence, blood, and gore that go with them. In addition, the dynamics of male-male relationships are abundant in the film, for example: staring that signifies desire for a potential sexual mate (Bogs eyeing the neighborhood prostitute), sizing up potential rivals (Paco, Bogs, and Boy's stare at Perez on their first meeting), and aggression against competition (Paco and Boy's sneering at Perez during a chance encounter at a street corner), among other things. With such visual clues in the film, one cannot help but ask where the film got its "gay film" label.

The gay beauty pageant rehearsal by Maxi and his friends, the courtship with his puppy-love interest, the stolen kiss, and even the balcony scene of veiled communication between Maxi and Perez at the end of the film could probably be deemed as typical juvenile adventures; they do not necessarily have to be deemed gay. Pre-adolescent males and even females usually tend to explore and to go on such adventures – except for the gay beauty pageant which could take other forms of dress-up activities depending on what gender the kids involved might be. In addition, pre-teens who show gay tendencies are tolerated now, perhaps

because of the positive albeit feminine traits increasingly attached to homosexuality such as responsibility, creativity, and articulateness. This kind of tolerance is evident from that popular, not necessarily mythical, exchange between middle-class parents: Parent 1: “Which do you prefer, a straight or a gay son?” Parent 2: “A gay one, because he’s more likely to take care of me when I grow old.” This reflects the nurturing and responsible traits attached to homosexuals compared to straight males. This is because in contemporary Filipino culture the youngest male offspring is expected to take care of the parents in the latter’s old age, a role traditionally assumed because he will inherit the ancestral home.

Looking at the title character alone would not provide a complete picture of the *gayness* of the film. Maxi is definitely gay, but that does not characterize the film. One has to go deeper into the narrative and the extent to which the characters are portrayed to get to that singular conclusion. Gay films place the homosexual character at the center of the narrative. Often these films present homosexual issues and struggles that address their “otherness” or their being different. Common conflicts in gay films involve the lack of recognition and acceptance from the society they are in, or the dilemma of whether or not to come out and accept one’s homosexuality. Maxi’s character in this case does not face the same problems and issues that traditional gay films portray. *Ang Pagdadalaga...* presents Maxi as part of a community that fully accepts the homosexual without reservation or ridicule, unlike in typical gay films.

Gay stereotypes in local Filipino films commonly portray homosexuals as a vulgar sort: they cross-dress, wear heavy make-up, speak loudly, and walk with hips swaying vigorously. However, a new generation of films and filmmakers has been covering new ground in its depiction of the subtle charms of the homosexual Filipino. Following the success of films like *Pusong Mamon* (Soft Hearts, Lamangan & Quizon, 1998) wherein Nick (Eric Quizon) and Ron (Albert Martinez), try to raise a child and build a family along with a straight female Annie (Lorna Tolentino); and *Miguel/*

*Michelle* (Portes, 1998) where Miguel (Romnick Sarmenta) leaves his province for the United States, and comes back after several years as Michelle, a philanthropic transsexual – gay portrayals in the local film industry are becoming more attuned to gay sensibilities. In *Pusong Mamon* Nick and Ron are portrayed as young urban professionals – highly educated, successful in their careers, and fashionably dressed. Their looks and actions in the film are not exaggerated. Only the circumstances they are in suggest their gayness.

This is a far cry from films 20 or more years earlier in which gay types in the movies were depicted in an embroidered, if not comical, fashion – one-piece floral dresses, disheveled wigs, bright and colorful makeup, heavily accessorized, and a matching scarf to hide their 5 o'clock shadows, just like the characters in *Paru-Parong Buking* (Fake Butterflies, Navoa, 1985), a story of five macho male cross-dressers. In the film *Ako si Kiko, Ako si Kikay* (I Am Kiko, I am Kikay, Relon-Makiling, 1987), a closet gay who is very much male in front of his family, but a flirtatious little girl elsewhere, and the *Pacifica Falayfay* (Carlos, 1969) films, about the character Pacifica (Dolphy) struggling to be accepted in homophobic Filipino society. These films present homosexuality in situations that resemble the fish-out-of-water tradition in classical comedies where homosexual antics are no more than a source of comic relief.

*Ang Pagdadalaga...* has brought the image of the homosexual Filipino a step further by rejecting such stereotyped representations. In several situations, we find scenes involving homosexuals only heard of from neighborhood tales until now. However, instead of focusing on these gay myths, the film tries to introduce gays in non-typical situations and tells of the possibility of homosexuality in traditionally male-dominated environments in two instances. First, the director situated Maxi as an accepted member of a *maton-siga* (macho-bully) family: a much divergent move from the typical Filipino household portrayals in local mainstream cinema.

For years since cinema was introduced in the Philippines, in portrayals of the typical Filipino household, the family often consisted of the father, the mother, the son, and the daughter. Each member is expected to perform an assigned role reflective of the typical and ideal Filipino family. The father is usually the breadwinner of the family, the protector and defender of the home, and the sole authority on all matters. The mother is often the nurturer, the source of inspiration and moral pulchritude, and the shoulder to cry on. The son, usually the older among siblings, is the father's assistant, the second in command, and the successor in the absence of the patriarch. The daughter is always the baby of the family, the darling of the father, the one to assist mother, and the object of family protection and affection. Members who do not conform to this norm, those who fail to perform their roles properly, are punished and expelled from the household.

Maxi's family obviously is far from being typical. The absence of the mother clearly establishes that the family has lost the source of moral guidance, and whatever type of people they have become the result of that loss. Maxi fills that void, for instance in keeping in check his father and brothers' decision not to be overly aggressive with Perez, who tries to interfere with the family's business. In another scene, reminiscent of Filipino action films where the image of the woman holding back a son, or a husband from doing the unthinkable is common, Maxi tries to prevent his father from meeting Perez in a final confrontation, and his siblings Boy and Bogs, from avenging their father's death. Maxi also plays the role of sister and darling of the family when in a scene during lunchtime, the three notice Maxi losing his appetite after being rejected by Perez. Bogs immediately drops his spoon, goes over to Maxi, and leans his head on Maxi's shoulder as a dog waiting to be patted on the head. This kind of acceptance of Maxi's role as the sole female in the family is introduced even in the early parts of the film, where both father and older siblings accept Maxi's femininity and acknowledge his extraordinary needs.



L-R: Boy (Neil Ryan Sese), Bogs, Maximo, and Paco (Soliman Cruz) in a scene from the movie. (Retrieved May 18, 2006 from [http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/pagdadalaga\\_ni\\_maximo\\_oliveros/photos.php](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/pagdadalaga_ni_maximo_oliveros/photos.php))

Second, after establishing the setting (where homosexuality and homosexuals are fully accepted in the family and in the community), *Solito* goes a step further by introducing homosexuality inside traditionally male-dominated institutions, like a police community precinct.

Victor Perez is introduced as a rookie cop who is full of idealism. True to his calling, he was quick to defend Maxi from the latter's assailants, when Maxi was late going home from a gay beauty pageant rehearsal. Like any rookie cop, Perez sports a clean face, well-trimmed body, and crisp uniform. On his usual rounds in the neighborhood, he walks tall among the people he serves, and stands out among his peers. He is, in short, portrayed as a perfect officer and gentleman. Is he?

*Solito's* portrayal of Maxi's perfect cop suggests otherwise. In the scene where he first encountered Paco and his brood, when he carried Maxi home, Perez is framed in a manner that is less masculine than the other males around him. It is as if the camera is sizing him up the same way the other characters are – whether he is good or crooked, smart or dumb, and straight or gay. Noticeable in this scene are the types of gaze that spell suspicion and alarm: it is the same gaze a male animal would focus on another male

animal during mating season, or during times when territoriality and dominance are at stake. Perez's reaction to this typical male behavior is submission, as he is indeed in Paco's territory.

In another sequence, in Perez's own territory this time, his masculinity is again tested when he is assaulted right in front of his house. This attack is perpetrated by no less than Paco and his men and it is clearly a violation of Perez's space. However, Perez is unable to fight back and defend himself. Adding insult to injury, Paco makes the remark: "*wala ka naman palang ibubuga...*" ("you don't have what it takes..."). Following that beating, in a later scene we see Paco and Boy walking down a street while Perez and a partner patrol an alley. At the corner, the two pairs meet. It is clear that Perez and his partner have an advantage. They both have the upper hand with their height and build, their uniform and authority, and more importantly, they are armed. It is a tense, but brief moment as the two pairs stand toe to toe, waiting for who will be the first to stand down and let the other pass. Paco and Boy sneer at Perez, provoking him with a stare and a wicked smile. Perez's partner gets agitated. However, Perez looks down in submission, steps aside, and lets the two pass. It is in that moment of submission that the question over Perez's masculinity becomes more resonant.

Such is the relationship between Paco, Boy, and Bogs with Perez: the constant suspicion and sizing up whenever the latter encroaches on the former's territory. On one hand, Maxi's family is involved in the underworld, the other is a police officer. On the other hand, because Maxi's infatuation over Perez has been quite obvious to Maxi's family and Perez has been deemed a prospective partner for Maxi, it is therefore interpreted that Perez is being sized up to find out how much of a man he is for Maxi, should the courtship between the two become serious.

Maxi's courtship of Perez begins with a stare – a curious stare when Maxi follows Perez to the church and another stare when Maxi meets Perez on the street, the same stare that Mulvey calls the male gaze. This "male gaze" is the same gawking that is

described by Mulvey as happening inside cinemas where females are portrayed as objects of male desire. On this occasion, Perez becomes the object of another male gaze wherein his persona, his physique and his countenance become an “appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact...” (in Mast, Cohen, & Braudy, 1992). The stare eventually leads to a brief talk, then to a close friendship, and then to an intimacy, which we can only deduce outside the film.

From being the damsel in distress, Maximo Oliveros in the presence of Victor Perez becomes the fiancée and lover missing in the latter’s life. This Maxi achieves by regularly bringing Perez his lunch, frequently accompanying him in his apartment during off hours, tending to him as when Perez is badly beaten by his father and siblings, cooking him breakfast, and even trying to change his own looks to fit the type of partner Perez has in mind. Initially, Perez seems like an older brother to Maxi. However, in the course of Maxi’s visits to his apartment, Perez gradually turns from brother to something else. It all starts when, at Maxi’s prodding, Perez finally answers Maxi’s question about what his ideal girl is like: “*yung simple – walang makeup, natural lang ang bubok...*” (“The simple type – no makeup, natural hairstyle...”) Maxi’s response to this is to take off his fashion headband and lip color, with the scene shot in a manner suggesting a ritual. Things run smoothly between them until one time, as Maxi again brings Perez his lunch and amidst the jeering of other cops at the precincts about the “sweethearts” blossoming relationship, Perez turns sour on Maxi. Perez, looking rather confused, walks away from Maxi and tells him, “*Huwag mo na akong gulubin, humanap ka na lang ng kasing-edad mo.*” (Don’t bother with me anymore; find someone your own age.) The statement is quite significant in that it is subject to several interpretations. One reading is that, all things being equal between Maxi and Perez, the only obstacle that remains between them is the fact that Maxi is only 12-years-old.

This brings to the fore the issue of Perez’s (homo) sexuality. The film presents several clues on the matter. At first glance, Perez

does not seem to fit the profile of a homosexual and his introduction is that of a straight, macho cop in uniform. However, as the film progresses, one notices in several scenes where Perez is juxtaposed with other macho male characters that his maleness pales in comparison to the



Maxi and Victor in one of the light moments in the movie. (Retrieved May 16, 2006 from <http://maximooliveros.tripod.com/mgapics.htm>)

other men in the film. In addition, his personal circumstances provides other indications. On his first visit to his apartment, Maxi discovers that Perez is single, has never married, lives alone, and is unattached. In addition, he is quite attractive, has good posture, and by his looks, probably smells good too. Also added are scenes where he irons his own uniform, polishes his own shoes, and is portrayed as having clean hands and nails.

Admittedly, nothing is wrong with the above description. Nevertheless, one cannot help but ask what is the matter with him. Why did the director fail to frame Perez in a manner that reflects the stereotypical male cop, considering that all other characters have already been typecast? Perez deviates from the usual image of cops whether in local or Hollywood movies: he is too clean, has no nasty habits, and is quite nice even to Maxi's family who has badly beaten him up. Upon reviewing his dossier, Hepe makes a remark that although Perez has been with the force for quite a while, it is surprising that Perez has an untarnished record. To this Hepe adds a statement subject to varying interpretations, "*Gagawin kitang tunay na pulis, kung gusto mo...*" ("If you want, I'll make you into a real cop...").

However, it is in one scene between Perez and Maxi where the film stakes its claim to going beyond the traditional settings used by earlier gay films. It is in the scene where Perez teaches Maxi how to whistle. He tells Maxi to simply “put your lips together, and then blow”. Maxi tries several times until finally, he learns to whistle a tune. This scene, seemingly insignificant at first, proves otherwise near the end of the film. After witnessing his father’s murder, Maxi turns cold on Perez even as Perez tries to win him back several times. In a final attempt to reconnect with Maxi, Perez comes to Maxi’s house one evening, looks at his window, and finding Maxi’s silhouette behind the curtains, starts to whistle. Upon hearing the sound, Maxi looks out the window, sees Perez on the street below, and whistles the same tune. The whistling thus reconnects the two characters. The scene ends with Perez tearful as Maxi whistles along with him.

Among local male gang members, whistling is often associated with fellatio, and asking a girl to whistle is always the same as asking how the girl looks like when she performs it. In the same vein, teaching someone to whistle is often akin to teaching someone how to perform the act. Whistling can also be associated with kissing. While the film failed to include, or might have even consciously excluded, an intimate (kissing or otherwise) scene between Maxi and Perez, it nonetheless provided a scene that suggests the extraordinary relationship that the two characters have.

Furthermore, the window/whistle scene provides an image that can be interpreted as Perez’s realization of his own sexuality; and that although he thought otherwise, Maxi is really way above him, literally and figuratively. This is made all the more obvious by the way the director framed Perez *vis-à-vis* Maxi. Shakespearean style, Perez, teary-eyed, is seen on the street and foregrounds the frame, while Maxi is set on the background on the second floor window. Following this scene, the film closes with Maxi walking his way to school, with Perez following him in his jeep. Maxi pretends to ignore Perez as the latter runs ahead only to wait for

Maxi at the street corner. Seeing this, Maxi proceeds with his cheerful, flirtatious gait as Perez watches.

*Ang Pagdadalaga...* tells not only of the blossoming of Maxi – from a playful innocent 12-year-old into the more mature and responsible “lass” that “she” wishes to become – but also of the blossoming of Perez into what he had tried to conceal all throughout the film. In this regard, the film is a step forward in the portrayal of homosexuals in Filipino mainstream films. It is an attempt, and a successful one at that, in presenting homosexuality in settings and institutions that are traditionally dominated by male characters. This is an improvement from the films of not so long ago in which males are set on one side, females on the other, and those who are “in-between” are outside and laughed at. In addition, the real homosexual in the film is made to don an authoritative uniform, play a traditionally male role, and maintain an image that is decent, sensitive, and subtle, and far from the stereotypes that have become regular fare in run-of-the-mill mainstream films.



Nathan Lopez and JR Valentin in a promotional poster. (Retrieved May 16, 2006 from <http://www.abs-cbn.com/entertainment/ent-111905-maxi.aspx>)

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## Films

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