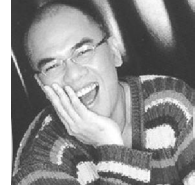


## On Pop Icons, Pop Culture, and the Media: A Private Conversation with Boy Abunda

*Interview by Fernando A. Austria, Jr.*



**E**ugenio Abunda, Jr. (popularly known as Boy Abunda) defines pop culture in this interview and more importantly in the real world. As a star builder and media personality, he contributes to the production of pop culture commodities as well as sets the mind trends that make for what is popular.

*From Boronggan to Manila, Boy Abunda uses the roller-coaster as a metaphor to describe his journey. “Rough but fun,” he says. “The joy ride of my life.” And very telling too when he admits that in his youth he never saw one. His less privileged roots manifest itself in his view of Media, Pop Culture, and Pop Icons—a perspective that is both critically informed and grounded on the realities of Philippine society.*

*While at the Ateneo de Manila, Abunda jumped from one odd job to another until he landed at the Metropolitan Theater working as a “chorus girl”, doing stage management work, hobnobbing with Manila’s society, interacting with theater stalwarts like Tony Mabesa, Behn Cervantes, Adul de Leon, and Angie Ferro and finally being hand-picked by the late Conchita Sunico to do PR work for the Met.*

*From the Met, Abunda finds himself in the world of entertainment—in an industry of celebrity images and media events. Practically self-taught in the rudiments of public relations and image building, Abunda went into talent management with nothing else except, as he said, “Lakas ng Loob”. As he built the careers of several stars and idols, Boy himself became one. The force that drove him to what he is today is “sheer passion out of a need for a good life”.*

*One of his challenges, and a very personal goal at that, was to change the convention that news and public affairs and entertainment do not mix. Hosting **The Buzz**, **Private Conversations**, and **Home Boy** at the same time, to him is a victory that disproves the notion that “when you do entertainment you’re supposed to be bobo”.*

*Indeed what Abunda has gone through to achieve his iconic status is marked by the ups and downs of a roller-coaster. These experiences shape the way he defines and re-defines pop icons, pop culture, and the role of media in this culture industry.*

**Question:** *What were you basically aiming for when you started out? What was on your mind?*

Answer: I was a gypsy. At that point, when you are young, you don't have to be conscious that you are looking for something. I wanted a better life, that one I knew. *Hindi* conscious *sa akin yun*. What did I want? I didn't know at the time, all I knew was *ayaw kong istorbobihin ang nanay ko sa Samar na isang public school teacher. Kamamatay lang ng tatay ko, gusto kong maghanap-buhay. Hindi ko pa nga alam na* I wanted a career in entertainment, enjoy *lang ako dun*. Up to a certain extent, it was about survival. *Nangarap ba ako? Oo nangangarap ako. Pero ang pangarap ko nun ay yun magkaroon ng magandang buhay.*

**Q:** *The turning point in your career, from working in the theater to becoming a media practitioner was when Conchita Sunico assigned you to do PR work. What did she see in you?*

**A:** Yes. *Tapang siguro*, guts, I have nothing but that. Then Tita Conching called for me and said, "Somebody told me," the exact words of Tita Conching were, "You get along well with a lot of people in the theater, would you like to work for me?" I said "yes ma'am." "Would you like to be my PR?" I said, "yes Ma'am... What is PR?" "I would teach you..."

**Q:** *How did you manage? What did you realize and discover about PR work?*

**A:** *Ang* introduction *ko sa* PR was press releases for the theatre productions. Until I educated myself via all the books that I started to read. *Kasi wala talaga akong alam*. Until I expanded my concept of PR into what I know of PR today. *But talagang self-study yun*. It started with *akala ko pag maraming lumalabas sa diyaryo, yun na yun*. Until I realized that you have to do imaging for the theatre. You have to do long term plans in terms of public relations. You have to communicate to a public; to identify a public; to identify the kinds of materials for these publics.

**Q:** *What kind of image was Met building at that time? What was your take in popularizing the theater productions of the Met?*

**A:** In the beginning, there was a very traditional concept of a theatre. *Laging may conflict na napakagaganda ng mga produksiyon bakit hindi maabot? Ang Symphony bakit hindi ma-appreciate ni Aling Pasing?*

*Bakit ang Trojan Women, hindi ma-appreciate. We wanted to compete with the movies for an audience. So we started going to schools. That I think was a good direction kasi ang umpisa ng labat dapat eskuwelahan. Ngayon, kung ako ang tatanungin, parang, buwag kang makipagkompetensiya. Gumawa ka ng merkado. No matter how small that market will be, umpisahan mo and start from there. Ang mali ko, ang mali namin noon, yung pananaw naming... there was a certain condescension, you know, high art: na parang, tayo naman we have discipline, blah-blah-blah. Until dumating yung panahon na, bumaligtad. Ang mga artista nag-tea-teatro para magkaroon ng image. Eh ngayon, wala nang nanonood sa pelikula, I think this is the best time for theatre to attack.*

Q: *Given that, how would you react to the statement that “the distinction between high and low cultures becomes less meaningful?”*

A: Oh yeah, oo. Less meaningful and negligible, almost ignored. Why? Because, *iilan lang naman ang nakaka-appreciate ng high art as against pop art for example. There should be no quarrels for me. The problem begins, when one insists that one is right. When somebody insists that simply because you do Shakespeare, you’re supposed to be more educated than someone who enjoys Dreamboy. Ang katotohanan lang, mas marami yung isa, mas popular.*

Q: *How would you then define popular culture?*

A: *Mahirap na tanong pero... Ok when you say pop, it’s popular hindi ba? Words that come into mind are kaugalian, the morals, behaviors ng younger generation. Yun ang unang pumapasok, di ba? When you are talking about culture, I’m not even talking about taste, I’m talking about civilization. You’re talking about arts, fashion, conveniences of everyday life. Popular culture is the everyday life of the common tao as interpreted by the intelligencia or the educated middle-class. Because yung common tao naman, subconsciously, unconsciously practices pop culture but does not live to identify it. It takes a middle class, an intelligent middle class or the intelligencia, to actually interpret that as pop culture. So, to me, that’s it, I mean pop culture just by common sense, pop culture to me is basically an art form that happens everyday to the common tao interpreted by an intelligent middle class.*

*It’s more common as opposed to high art which is really tedious. Which is really esoteric, di ba? At saka napaka-debatable pa. That’s*

why I always love to say that I'm a social climber who wants to take a look at high art or high fashion or whatever.

**Q:** *Going back to what you said about popular culture, that it is the everyday life of the common tao, who then is the common tao?*

**A:** The common *tao* is me, the boy who comes from Samar. The common *tao* is... it does not necessarily have to do with economics. In a country like the Philippines, I would say a Third World Country, the common *tao* is the 80% of this country. The 80% who are not exposed to the high art forms, the ballets of Bolshoi, the Classical singers of... as opposed to, you know. The common *tao*: the working class.

**Q:** *Would you say that there is a "generic" common tao, a mass audience? And if there is a generic common tao, is there a generic popular culture for this common tao?*

**A:** Yes, there is a generic common *tao* and there is a generic pop culture at a certain given time. Does economics have anything to do with it? Partly, yes, but not necessarily a main influence. *Kasi pwede ka ring magbago... at nagbago na eh.* Like you can be moneyed, but you entertain pop culture, you are part of pop culture.

*Bakit nila nagugustuhan,* that's an entirely different question, depending on *kakayaban*, malleability, depending on where they are and how ready they are for what the principal movers of pop culture are feeding them. *Kasi hindi labat naman nagwo-work eh. Hindi labat nang binibenta kinukuba nila,* so when you say there's a generic taste, generic pop culture, generic pop audience meron eh. And it's a very powerful base which I feel can not be ignored. *Kasi kadalasan di ba* there are misnomers like *bakya ba ito, baduy ba ito, hindi eh...* That they are powerful by sheer numbers? No, *hindi eh.* Are they tasteless simply because they're more common? *Hindi eh.* Are they more tasteful than the high art? *Hindi rin eh.* They are who they are.

**Q:** *What is the role of media in popular culture?*

**A:** *Napakalaki.* This is the era of television. *Para sa akin napakalakas kasi binobomba ka eh. Napakalakas ng impluwensiya.* Can you imagine? Statistics would show how many television sets there are in our country, how many hours an individual actually spends watching television, and how many times he is being told of what is right

and what is not, of what is good and what is not. *Kasi, di ba napaka-subconscious nun — ayoko naman ng brainwashing. But yung ganoong komunikasyon ay napakalaki. Tapos susundan pa ng radyo yung TV, at kung nasa siyudad kang nakatira, meron pang below the line, yung mga billboards to whatever gimmicks. Media has so much to do with popular culture. Para sa akin yun ang pinakamalakas na impluwensiya.*

**Q:** *You are saying that the media has a strong influence on popular culture. How strong is this influence? How does it influence popular culture? How do people make popular culture from “the commodities supplied by the culture industries?”*

**A:** You need technology to basically reach out to a market, to this market. *Oo, popular culture has become so popular because of the media, di ba?* But that is not to deny the power of the people to say “*ayaw namin ito.*” That’s why you need an informed citizenry, you need an informed public. *Kasi* the culture industries as you would call them, would depend on FGD’s, would go back to the public and say *ano ba ang gusto ninyo?* Basically it’s inspired, motivated by what they watch, by what they see in popular media. It’s a chicken and egg debate. To a certain extent I agree because the more active component in this equation is the culture industries. Because again, that’s the middle class thinking: what does this public need? Very often now, which is a very good development, is they go back to the public... to check if what they’re doing is correct. They’re very sensitive now to what this public wants. But this public admittedly, yes and I would say this, is very malleable. Because they do not think as thoroughly as the culture industries. *Kasi wala itong vested interest eh. Ito gusto ko, enjoy ako, ay gusto ko yan ah, napatawa ako eh. Ito, the culture industries, ang primary, principal purveyor. Ito ang may ibinibenta eh, kaya ito ang mas nag-iisip.* But let us not deny the power of this public.

**Q:** *Is it the same “chicken and egg” negotiation in the creation of popular icons? But before you answer that, for you who are today’s pop icons?*

**A:** *Napaka-dangerous ng mga tanong na ito (laughs).* Icons, first people who come to mind, Kris Aquino, Imelda, Cory... pop icons. *Mahirap magsabi talaga ng pop icons pag nasa gitna ka ng industriya.* Because, I know them too well. *Oo, there’s an abuse in the use of icon, just as we abuse diva too much. Di ba? Pag medyo magaling*

*tumili*, diva. *Pag medyo ganito*, fashion icon... *Sa akin pag sinabi mong icon*, it is someone, that is why without false humility I don't want to claim to be an icon, *nakalampas ka na doon sa stardom*... You can, to a certain point, manufacture a star, you can to a certain point manufacture a celebrity whether you are a politician, a fashion designer or a movie star, a singer. With connections, with careful planning, with a little luck, and a lot of prayers, you can create a star but icons come about as phenomenon, *di ba?* *Ang icon*, whether she resigns or stops tomorrow, she will linger on, she will always be a point of reference. An icon to me is Aunor, an icon to me is Imelda Marcos. Whether she rises or falls again, she will always be Imelda. Icon to me is close to being legendary. And that's nothing to do with virtues. I mean, *di ba*, you can hate her, love her, but she's Imelda. You will look at her, *di ba?* You may disagree, you may detest her politics and you may say that the family has abused human rights during their time. But she's an icon; she's an icon of what? Of fashion, she's an icon of *mga kabadingan*. Kris Aquino, to me, she will always be the quintessential concept of a celebrity. She knows it. Its timing, its rhythm, it's the moment and she's lucky because she's the daughter of Ninoy and Cory. Aunor, she's the creation of God and destiny. *May mga ganun, maraming bagay ang hindi mo naipapaliwanag*

**Q:** *Within your definition of a pop icon, what is the role of pop icons in the production of popular culture? Let us take Kris Aquino as an example, how does she contribute to popular culture?*

**A:** *Alam mo nakakatarwa, kasi* like last week she celebrated her birthday, *napakalaki, napaka-influential niya*. And that is saying a lot, *di ba?* When Kris Aquino says, "I'm going to my hairstylist and I'm going to have my hair colored," you know the feedback (on SMART), hundreds and thousands called back and said, "What is the new color of the hair of Kris?" So, what is the role of icons in pop culture? *Mukha ng pop culture jun. Kung ano ang sinasabi, ano ang kasuotan, ano ang...* that's why they are very influential.

Top of the mind *sila eh. Ang role niya* can be very powerful. So the icon ideally, should know that. She can use it properly and she can abuse it. *Ang ideal* is if she can inspire, if she can empower, if she can make this world a better place to live in, you know. But most icons in the history of the celebrity business are not aware of their social responsibility, *di ba?*

**Q:** *Can you say that before one becomes an icon, one first becomes a star? How does one become a star?*

**A:** Oo. You can not be an icon without having to go through that. *Ako, halimbawa, pag dinadalhan ako ng potential singer ang tinitingnan ko agad, halika pag-aralan nga natin, anong meron ka na wala ang iba? Ano ang nasa landscape ngayon, paano kita ipapasok? Ikaw ba ay pabibigain ko habang kumakanta?* The indications of star building no... The unique selling point, *hindi pa rin narawala yun*. You have to study that, what makes you different? *Anong meron ka na lilingon ako? Ikaw ba yung topless na walang panty lagi pag kumakanta? Ikaw ba yung kulot ang bubok na natatakluban ang mukha?* Oo, some call it image, some call it packaging, but there has to be a certain individuality about you. The reason why, today for example, *ang hirap sumikat* because they all blend.

**Q:** *Earlier you mentioned the importance of what the audience wants, how does this factor in the creation of a star? Would you agree that they are like commodities meant for a specific market? And as such how are they manufactured?*

**A:** So can stars be manufactured? Yeah, to a certain point, sometimes you're successful, sometimes you're not. *Ang larong diyaryo, may network ka*. There's timing. There's the individuality of the star. It's a combination of many things. Although *wala ka talagang formula kasi* you deal with intangibles, charisma, *dating*, x-factor. *Pero may mga bagay na controllable. Pagplanuhan natin ang package mo. Ang uso ngayon mga singing contests, planuhin natin. O, ipapasok kita sa singing contest, pero anong package natin, di ba?* Yes, *ako talaga*, without having to be defensive about it, to a large extent, yes, stars are commodities. But the only difference is, these are the only commodities that can react. But yes, we are commodities controlled by capitalists to a certain extent.

**Q:** *How did you turn Ai-Ai into the Comedy Concert Queen that she is now?*

**A:** A lot of hardwork, a lot of luck, and a lot of prayers. *Alam mo*, she was just doing what everybody was doing: she was very funny, I saw that. I realized when I looked at the landscape that no female comedian in the country dared the major venues. You know you had Mitch Valdez, Nanette Inventor, Tessie Tomas who were doing the longest running shows in the country. As a manager, *pinag-usapan namin. Sige nga, mula sa sing along*, let's develop materials. So we did a series for the folk arts — *yung mga* “Love Me, Respect

Me”, whatever, etcetera, etcetera. That became the trigger point of the foray of Ai-Ai into the big league. So there was no question about the talent, but it was just floating in the realm of the small time. *Pero* it didn’t happen in one year, we had to do five years of Folk Arts and Araneta before the networks took notice. And when they did, *Tanging Ina* came about. And today, it is the biggest earning movie in the history of Philippine movies.

**Q:** *How did you manage the risk? How did you utilize the media to reduce the risk? How did you make the media work for you?*

**A:** The package was clear. She was very easy to sell; she’s a lovely, lovely material for print media. For example, because she would answer anything; open life, open book *ang bubay*. Indications of stardom. *Kontrobersiyal ang bubay*. She could handle anything. So in that sense, print was an open sea for Ai-Ai. On television, she was the girl who is not afraid to wear flowers bigger than Mt. Banahaw. She was a girl who is not afraid to make fun of herself.

We used media, we harnessed media properly. And we also helped media to a certain extent because there was something new: the pictorials of Ai-Ai were different.

**Q:** *In a sense you were creating a media event.*

**A:** Oh, yes. It has to be a media event. You can not produce a star without having to create a big media event. Remember, media in the context of pop culture is the primary bridge between the market and the pop icon. *Kasi ang* media can be very critical. Whether *tanggapin ka o hindi ka tanggapin ng* media, for as long as *pag-usapan ka ng* media, *ok ka*. When I open a new show... I am not worried about being liked or disliked, it is a part of my territory. But if you don’t look at me, that is a problem. You know when I give lectures I always say, “...*lalo na pag* responsible critics, *hurwag kang matakot, hurwag kang mapikon. Ibig sabihin niyan nagbubukas ang buhay mo* into media events that you’re talking about.” But the moment you open a talkshow, and nobody talks about it, *problemang malaki yon*.

**Q:** *When you create media events, when you create stars, you create images. How real are these images? Meaning how much of what is fed to the media, and consequently the public, is real and how much is manufactured or invented?*



A: The images are dependent on many things. *May* image *ka na malapit sa katotohanan* ng pop star. *May* images *na* opposite. *Ang bait-bait pero ang packaging ang taray taray. Meron namang ang taray-taray sa personal pero ang image ay hello.* How real are they, they are real in the sense *na* they are created. But *yung* real in the context *na totoo ba itodun sa tao? Dependekung anong ibinibenta mo. Yung katarayan halimbawa ni Kuh Ledesma* was by accident. She is not really *mataray*. She was just very shy in the beginning. So *yung* shyness *niya* became the “ice queen.” Some images happen by accident. Some images, in the beginning, *ito ang* image and then gone *na ngayon* because the word is re-invention. I mean in the context of Madonna this year I am this, next year I am this... next year *labas suso ko, oo, sa susunod na taon*, I am a mother.

Q: *How would you characterize the audience given the media events and these changing images?*

A: You know, there’s a little paradigm shift in so far as public perception of images is concerned. *Kung noon gusto nila na, ay, Cinderella story, parang ang nano-notice ko ngayon, gusto nila ng mga pop star na totoo.* The public is very forgiving, or the public has very short memories. They like Kris Aquino because she’s very honest. She apologizes when she’s wrong, She says *ganito lang ako.* To a certain extent I know they like me because I’m very honest about my being gay; that I’m very honest about my being not so beautiful. And they like my being close to my mother. But they still like the beautiful and the young and so much youth comes into play in the context of imaging. But images can be real, images can be fickle, images can be imagined.

The audience can enjoy some; the audience can accept some that’s why some of them last. The audience can just kick them out, *meron eh. Kasi* as they would say, you have an audience that’s starting to think, that likes to be pleased. It’s an audience that likes to be excited. Hindi na ito *yung* masyadong passive *eh.*

Q: *They are active?*

A: *Medyo eh, nagre-react na eh...* Yeah, *oo*, interesting. Like for example let’s go to Sandara Parks. She’s an audience-driven icon. *Ako*, I call her iconic *kasi* there’s no explanation. That’s another one, that’s almost close to a phenomenon. She’s far from being so beautiful but how can you get 250,000 text votes in a day because of the Korea novellas? You know, *may ganun eh*, audience-driven *yun.*

Q: *We've talked about the role of media, we've talked about the audience' part in the creation of stars, what then is the role of the icon or star in the whole process?*

A: Principal *ang* role *niyan*. As an actor in that stage, you have to play it well. Do you have to be conscious about it? Yes and no. Kris Aquino to me is one of the most fascinating icons because half of her is calculated and half of her is not. Kris Aquino has a lot to say in the making of her image. Sandara Park is just as clueless as I am as to why she became who she is. *Si* Kris is more conscious: I have to look good, my lines have to be proper, I have to have the rights clothes, I invest on, I have to read books because I have to be thorough, I have to be conversant. They happen because they're there. *Suwerte yung mga*, like Nora Aunor, like in the beginning I don't think that she was conscious of what she was going to be. Kris is very is very particular. "I know what I have to say. You know when I deliver that speech, *kailangan alam ko*", at "Boy," she always tells me, "the public loves me for who I am. And who I am is painfully honest." So *aktibo si* Kris *sa prosesong yun* as opposed to Sandara, who would just smile.

Q: *When can you say that a person is a star? What are the indicators of stardom?*

A: Money (Laughs). When you're paid a lot for endorsements and when you earn millions every month. Number two are the physical indicators. The financial aspect is life changing. The public's attention, the public's adulation is translated into something monetary and then to something practical, you know, *nag-iiba ang... alam mo, gumaganda sila. Hindi namansiya maganda pero pagpumapasok lumilingon ako, di ba?*

Q: *In the process of making stars, you have become a star and icon. What were your experiences in creating your own image?*

A: I am a product of the law of gravity...what happened to me is pure magic. It's really pure magic. I gravitated towards what I do today perhaps because of sheer passion; out of a need for a good life. Not for me but for my mother, for my whole family. I am overly ambitious and I am overly driven. And along the way I was brought to what I do, to this very day, I will tell you, I do *Home Boy*, *nagti-TOA pa ako*. TOA, *kumbaga sa atin, po-postmortem sa teatro*. Last night I ended my meetings with my writers at four

o'clock in the morning. I am still so driven. So who I have become is a lot of hard work.

Yes, like for example, when ABS was saying that as an entertainment figure, I could not go into public affairs. I said I wanna destroy that. Maybe because it was my hunger, it was my angst. I'll call it my angst to disprove the myth, to demythologize the myth that when you do entertainment your supposed to be *bobo*. I wanted to do public affairs, news affairs, news and current affairs show, 'cause I wanted to do politics, 'cause I wanted to prove that celebrity is generic. Whether you're a movie star or a politician, I can talk to you. And I also wanted to break the notion that when your entertainment, you're supposed to be flippant. I wanted to prove that I can do a serious interview with the president, with authors, with whatever. I wanted to break certain barriers.

I've been able to cross industries, in a landscape that is extremely territorial. *Dito ang camera men ng news, camera men ng news. Dito ang writers ng entertainment, entertainment.* But I am able to do a material like *Home Boy*, I'm able to do a material like *The Buzz*, and I am able to do news and current affairs like *Kontrobersyal*. I had, as what Dong Puno would call it, crossed-over.

Q: *How did you managed to create that image? How did you convince the management?*

A: I fought my way through. In this business you... have to have that killer instinct. I am not saying that in a negative way but you have to know how to seize the moment. You have to see it, you have to smell it. How did I do it? I went straight to the president of the network. I went to Freddie Garcia one day and I said, "Freddie I am doing *The Buzz*. I wanna do a conversation show and you know that I can do it. I can talk to senators, I can talk to politicians. Allow me to fly. *The Buzz* is very limited." In ten minutes, I had a show. *Lakas ng loob*.

Q: *Sometime ago you gave an interview and you said that you "...didn't want to grow old in the city. I have saved and invested in real estate so I have the money to buy medicine..."?*

A: Because the city is not kind to old prostitutes.

Q: *Yes, what did you mean by prostitutes?*

A: Along the way in your career you realized that you sell yourself a lot of times. And that is not said to self-deprecate, but I say that often in jest to diminish the pain. Many times in your life you will have to sell your body and soul to be able to achieve certain things. *Kakagatin mo ang pride mo, kakagatin mo ang paggalang mo sa sarili mo* because you want to achieve certain things. Yes, I didn't sell my body because there were no takers but many times in my life I had to sell my dignity. I will admit that. I had to sell the things that I believed in with passion because I wanted my talents to make it. I had to pretend I didn't understand certain things cause I want to understand certain things. Yes, I am a reformed prostitute but I prostituted myself many times over this career. Not just for myself but for a lot of people. And when you grow old, and when you grow weak and when you're gay and I've seen it, people are not kind to you. That's why I always say that I don't wanna grow old in the city. I wanna go back to my old lovely Samar where I could spend a lot of time with the sea and the coconut trees because they will remain forever kind to me.

Q: *What can you say about a culture industry that turns us into prostitutes just to achieve our goals, specially when you consider that the product of this industry, the pop icons and pop stars, is sometimes considered an opiate of the masses?*

A: At the end of the day, we are just really commodities of capitalism. *Nasabi ko na* as long as I know my way back home, *tapos alam ko kung ano ang pinanggalingan ko, at alam kong okay ako, okay ako. May kaduwagan din ako. Pero pag nasa gitna na ako ng laban, laban na rin. Pero mahirap, nakakapagod.* I'm not afraid, I mean I can walk away from all these, *dead-ma*.

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