

## The Good and the Bad: Aldub in Film

Richard Bolisay

Being a fan of Marvin Agustin and Jolina Magdangal in the 90s—arguably the most iconic love team of that era—meant clipping articles and pictures of them from magazines and songbooks, watching their every movie and TV appearance, buying almost every item they endorsed, and finding people with whom one could articulate the joys and jitters that seeing them together brings, without the feeling of being judged. Conversations with these people were often punctuated by extreme displays of emotion over the most trifling of recollected incidents. There was also the unwritten rule of fighting those who dared speak against them, those who spread malicious gossips to taint their reputation, and sometimes even those who preferred other love teams. But that being the 90s, all the aggression happened mostly in person and in tabloids.

Marvin and Jolina are no longer popular, but fan behavior towards on-screen celebrity couples remains practically the same. If one goes back even decades earlier, in the time of Nora Aunor and Tirso Cruz III or Vilma Santos and Edgar Mortiz, or much earlier with Carmen Rosales and Rogelio de la Rosa or Nida Blanca and Nestor de Villa, the spectacles of fanaticism are quite comparable. The chemistry between these couples becomes quite astonishing, especially if one focuses on the tremendous degree of mania and obsession it creates among the fans for such a long period time.

The creation and eventual proliferation of love teams are largely driven by a trajectory of commercial fare in which the end goal is to persuade people to *buy* them—indeed, they are merchandise offered in the most attractive packages, promising the most delightful of rewards. They are brands whose first sign of success is to be recognized at first glance and who are *manufactured* with the clearest intention: to take money and make more money—the best ones being those that do not make such aim obvious. The magic comes from making it all look wholesome and striking a balance between on-screen and off-screen intimacies that conform to accepted standards of decency. Everything is done in exchange for *kilig*, that priceless romantic pleasure felt upon seeing them, that good feeling obtainable only from being part of their journey as a couple.

Despite having similar goals, these love teams are set apart by their nuances: the time and timing, the image drawn for them in their projects, the commerce sustaining their popularity, the drama surrounding their specific circumstances, and most notably, the degree of devotion shown by their fans. Whenever the legitimacy of mainstream cinema is challenged, particularly in a condescending tone that diminishes its worth, one need only to look at the rich and vibrant history of Filipino love teams over

the decades and ruminate on how they attract a large portion of the local audience, taking into account the politics and sociology that bring them to life, including the kind of understanding and realization about them that can only be experienced by someone Filipino—someone with the sensibility specific only to *being* Filipino. The importance of love teams as a bearer of complex cultural identity cannot be dismissed.

Hence there is no denying the impact made by AlDub, the sensational pair of Alden Richards and Maine Mendoza, whose development and peak exemplify the modern-day love team created and commodified in the age of internet and social media. A huge chunk of this distinction owes to currency, but their rise to fame is phenomenal in that their TV moments, starting from their cute meet to their actual meeting, have always been treated as an everyday spectacle, a mix of scripted gags and situational comedy whose larger-than-life effect comes from the mundane interactions between Alden and Maine—their eye contact, their mouthing of words, their flirtations, their attempts at intimacy, the impossibility of touch between them, all done in possibly the most remarkable use of split-screen in current Philippine media.

Their overexposure—six days on TV, countless endorsements, huge billboards, magazine covers, record deals, trips abroad, etc.—has worked to their advantage. As capitalism thrives on every opportunity to make an enterprise grow bigger, it did not take long before Alden and Maine found themselves in the larger, more challenging realm of film, a predictable path teeming with unpredictable possibilities. With the right combination of material and marketing, movies can make a lot of money. The people behind AlDub are keen on proving that Alden and Maine are not just bankable TV personalities but successful movie stars as well—“blockbuster royalties” who can compete with their contemporaries with a younger fan base, namely, KathNiel (Kathryn Bernardo and Daniel Padilla) and JaDine (James Reid and Nadine Lustre).

No time was wasted. Just a few months after being introduced to the public, AlDub had their first film. *My Bebe Love: #KiligPaMore* was released as one of the entries to the 2015 Metro Manila Film Festival, further ensuring its box-office success. Not only did it deliver but it also held the record for the highest opening gross for any local film, with earnings of over 60 million pesos. Definitely a huge feat, but nothing beyond comprehension. Key to its success was merely giving what AlDub fans wanted, which was just putting them together on-screen while doing their usual antics—but not giving it entirely. The play with conservatism—no kissing, no sex, no violence—that whole push and pull of traditional courtship, whose every gesture is intended to fuel *kilig*, has remained their brand. Alden and Maine didn’t have to do

much in the film. Their interactions on TV as a couple may not require a fully realized story, but as film characters, the added challenge of sustaining interest for almost two hours can be easily overcome by not making them the sole focus—something that writer and director Jose Javier Reyes did on purpose.

*My Bebe Love* merely reproduces the AlDub of *Eat Bulaga*. It's lazy, and it does not even attempt to hide it. Alden: tall, geeky, cluelessly attractive. Typical boy-next-door. If the audience is not convinced, he'll just show his dimples. Maine: expressive eyes, big smile, consciously clumsy. Typical funny girl. If the audience is not convinced, she'll crack a joke or do her usual grimace. The *kilig* in the movie comes from knowing the context—the fictionalized story of Alden being smitten by Yaya Dub and their attempts at cute flirtations despite limitations—and Reyes only has to overplay this to kill fans with romantic excitement. When they talk for the first time, they are at a convenience store, with all the junk food items ridiculously facing backward to hide the brands. Like their TV segment, the film is a parade of product endorsements, often tastelessly inserted. The producers have truly exhausted every way to make this about money.

The more interesting couple in *My Bebe Love*, however, is played by Vic Sotto and Ai-Ai de las Alas. Contrary to AlDub's romance, theirs explodes with energy. They banter, shout, and hurl insults at each other. They make each other's life a living hell. They are always on fire and totally void of coyness. Both personify what AlDub, as a couple, cannot do: curse, have sex, be violent. Their story arc avoids subtlety and quietness, so whenever AlDub's plot is pushed, albeit nonsensically, the contrast is striking, and this makes effective entertainment especially for the fans. *My Bebe Love* alternates between these two distinct romances, and both couples arrive at the same end: together. Everybody happy. Confetti falling.

It is typical of mainstream fare to follow a traditional, innocuous structure on the pretext that audiences won't understand something risky. Boldness isn't its strongest suit. The idea of putting AlDub at the center means emphasizing their commonness—heck, even their dullness—and evoking the “purity” of their affection, the childishness and childlikeness of it, the shallow gestures and professions that make them endearing. Let Vic Sotto and Ai-Ai de las Alas be crass and crude: viewers will get it. But AlDub? No. They must be beacons of virtue and morality. They have a responsibility to please their fans. What gets in the way of telling a story is the set of limitations that comes with the nature of the love team, and since quality is not a priority, the mechanism is highlighted and put forward. From this viewpoint, capitalism is perfectly all right, especially since it is capitalism that backs AlDub. With the clarity of its intentions, mainstream

cinema can be partly blamed for this disregard or superficial regard for capitalism. It pervasively abides by a process that condones and satiates greedy moneymaking.

As a vehicle mainly for AlDub's stardom, *My Bebe Love* carries a repulsive ideology masked by its wholesome nature. With its box-office success, it will certainly espouse more films of its kind, contributing to this continuous cycle of creation that has long been making a particular portion of the industry stagnant. But *Imagine You and Me* (2016), released barely seven months later, is a surprising turn given this blatant precedent, for it puts AlDub in this conventional yet challenging box that tests their abilities not only to spark *kilig* apart from their usual tricks but also to ensure they can carry a whole movie through, without relying on their co-stars.

Something must have happened—an inspired realization or hard work finally materializing—because despite AlDub's busy schedule and the pressure to prove their first on-screen team-up was not a fluke, *Imagine You and Me* turns out to be a "film": one with a language that can be called cinematic, braced by a story that flows and characters that stand. It is not just shameless advertising or mawkish skits—there is ambition in its desire to be taken seriously, in telling a love story that has been told several times before, but with one main difference: Alden and Maine are in it. And thus, it needs to be told again.

Set mostly in Italy, a location that seems to push the film to be more deliberate in its *Romeo and Juliet* allusions, *Imagine You and Me* follows an old-fashioned romance: a young man and woman in a foreign land both dealing with their own priorities, meeting eventually, awkwardly, falling for each other, the man confronting an unresolved past, the woman waiting for her Prince Charming, then in due time both realizing true love and getting together despite difficulties—all wrapped in the unmistakable sheen of fiction. Alden plays Andrew: grumpy and pensive, steeped in his grief and gloom, with stepmom issues and the baggage of his previous relationship. Maine plays Gara: bubbly and assertive, driven to succeed and makes life easy for people around her, prone to overdoing her good intentions. The predictability of their relationship is a given, and it becomes secondary to the significant effort put into the design that makes watching it satisfying even from a non-AlDub fan. The story moves forward sensibly and provides Alden and Maine with colorful personalities.

Less than ten minutes into *Imagine You and Me*, a McDonald's meal shows up, but fortunately that's the only display of immodest commercialism. There is an understanding that Alden and Maine are already recognizable brands themselves, and this is a movie that aims to go beyond selling—as mentioned, it wants to be taken seriously. The writers, Aloy Adlawan and

Renato Custodio, adhere to a formula that allows the viewer to see the range of Alden and Maine as actors as well as gives the two actors a palette on which they can bring life to characters outside their TV personalities and go out of their comfort zones. It's a good move, especially since the director Michael Tuviera, whose work in the 2014 Cinemalaya film *The Janitor* proves his dependability to do mainstream without an icky aftertaste, values sophistication, as seen in the effective use of long takes and the balanced framing. The visual language, although offering nothing new or groundbreaking, is refreshing in its sleekness, and the foreign setting emphasizes the distinctly Filipino sense of camaraderie and attachment.

Whereas *My Bebe Love* merely appropriates AlDub's TV antics, *Imagine You and Me* takes the love team out of the box and lets them breathe a different air. It's a pleasant surprise seeing them in a different light without losing their charm, doing the occasional bits of singing and "dubsmashing," hearing the platitudes of love they live by, seeing them wholeheartedly embrace the corny and the *baduy*. Their horizons have widened, their potency as a love team has found strength in taking risks. The film has enabled them to switch between comedy and drama in varying degrees, giving them opportunities to discover nuances unknown to them before, and though imperfect, their performances are marked by unmistakable charisma, one that only effective love teams can pull off on-screen.

And yes: they kiss. Twice. On the lips. And in the second kiss, as the movie comes to an end, the camera revolves around them, the typical film kiss—sweet, dramatic, larger than life, conscious of the effect they are having, yet not letting this consciousness show—with the music blaring and the viewer witnessing how Alden and Maine look into each other's eyes, inseparable in each other's arms, no copout, no faking—an actual kiss. Needless to say, in film, this gesture is very important, especially since a kiss is the greatest signifier of love. This does not in any way taint their being conservative, but a cinematic moment can only come from breaking the rules, and the people behind AlDub know very well how to play the game. They make money, check. They please the fans, check. They make AlDub, in a year, the most iconic love team of its era, check. It's exciting to see where the compromises will take Alden and Maine—how they will make more money and at the same time not lose their charm. But for now, it is clear that their fans will gladly take all the bullets for them just to ensure they stay current and loved.

**RICHARD B. BOLISAY** is a writer, editor, and film critic based in Manila. His essays on cinema, music, and popular culture have appeared in various local and international publications. He served as a jury member for the Hong Kong International Film Festival, QCinema International Film Festival, and Cinema One Originals Film Festival (corresponding author: richardbolisay@yahoo.com).