

Binisaya, A New Generation of Cebuano Filmmakers: An Interview with Keith Deligero and Ara Chawdhury

Patrick F. Campos

When digital cinema reached a new level of influence and popularity in the Philippines in 2005, signaled by the coming of film festivals such as Cinemalaya and Cinema One Originals, the situation did not only encourage budding filmmakers in Manila; the drive to make films, to make cinemas new, was also felt all around the archipelago. By the time the first Cinema Rehiyon, the film festival which showcases works produced outside of the National Capital Region (NCR), was established by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) in 2009, it was already possible to curate several short film programs and to lineup feature-length films hailing from different places in Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. As of 2016, all major Philippine film festivals have shown feature films produced from or shot in regions beyond NCR, and not a few of these films have received major prizes in the Philippines and abroad.

It is interesting to note, as this interview reveals, that the pioneers of contemporary Cebuano cinema started making short films around 2005 and held their first DIY film festival, which they dubbed as Binisaya, in 2009. In between those years, Cebuano cinematographer and mentor to young filmmakers, Ruel Antipuesto, and Luzon-based director, editor, and musician, Jerrold Tarog, collaborated to make *Confessional* (2007), which jumpstarted feature filmmaking in Cebu. Not long after, Remton Siega Zuasola's *Damgo ni Eleuteria* (2010), broke new grounds for Cebuano cinema, in the process drawing the spotlight on a film scene that by then has actually been around

for some time. From there, we can say that a new generation of Cebuano filmmakers came of age, led by Zuasola, Keith Deligero, Victor Villanueva, and Christian Linaban, who all proved to be intensely productive and nurturing at the same time. And the number of practicing filmmakers in Cebu is growing. Thus, today, as scholars like Misha Boris Anissimov and Paul Douglas Grant are making strides in rediscovering the “lost” cinema of Cebu, a new generation of filmmakers is writing a new history of Cebuano cinema for the future.

In this interview, Keith Deligero, founder of the Binisaya Film Festival, and Ara Chawdhury, outspoken filmmaker and cultural organizer, talk to me about the beginnings and current struggles of the community they lovingly call the Binisaya Movement.

A pioneer of contemporary Cebuano cinema, Deligero is a director, screenwriter, cinematographer, and editor. He has directed four feature films, namely *Baboyngirongbuang* (2010), *Kordero sa Dios* (2012), *Iskalawags* (2013), and *Lily* (2016), for which he won the award for Best Director at the Cinema One Originals Film Festival. Chawdhury is a director, screenwriter, and producer. Her first full-length film, *Miss Bulalacao* (2015), won the award for Best Screenplay at the Cinema One Originals Film Festival and was cited as the Best First Feature by the Young Critics Circle.

Patrick F. Campos (PFC): Describe contemporary Cebuano cinema.

Keith Deligero (KD): The most active Cebuano feature film directors right now include myself, with four films, the latest being *Lily* (2016), Remton Zuasola with three films, the most recent being *Swap* (2015), Victor Villanueva with two films, the latest being *Patay Na Si Hesus* (2016), and Christian Linaban with two films, his last film being *Superpsychocebu* (2016).

Victor, Remton, and I went to college together. We were classmates. Christian was ahead of us by one year, but he was also from the same college. We started being interested in cinema and making films around 2005. Since then, we’ve made a number of short films and features.

I’m pretty sure there were other people who were making films around this time and maybe even before us. I’m just glad that since 2005, we’ve survived through all the struggles, the drama, and the politics of this thing called cinema. I think if we did not have this hard-core passion, we would probably have given up a few years after that. So yeah, being classmates and being friends, we’ve worked on each other’s films. And whatever opportunity we get in making films, we try to always incorporate Cebuano sensibilities.

Ara Chawdhury (AC): My understanding is that when Bigfoot (a film and television production school in Cebu) came into the picture in the early

2000s, a group of film enthusiasts were already around. They used to be advertising students of Radel Paredes at the University of San Carlos. A lot of these film enthusiasts met at Bigfoot as employees or students, and eventually left to collaborate. I understand that that's where Ruel Antipuesto and Jerrold Tarog first met before co-directing *Confessional* (2007), which is officially the first Cebuano digital feature film. *Confessional*, Remton's "To Siomai Love" (short, 2009) and *Damgo ni Eleuteria* (2010), the omnibus *Biyernes, Biyernes* (2011)—these were the projects that jumpstarted people's careers.

KD: I think Remton's *Damgo*, produced for the Cinema One Originals film festival, is the film that started the productivity of Cebuano feature films. Up to this date, *Damgo* is still the most successful Cebuano film. Although all the films made within our scene define our filmmaking and film-watching community.

AC: The Binisaya movement is what we've been calling this new wave. It was founded by Keith primarily, with Remton and Idden delos Reyes. Binisaya used to be just the name of the organization behind the screenings and film projects, like *Biyernes, Biyernes*. But with every event, believers came on.

KD: I think (contemporary Cebuano cinema) may be considered as a movement. We've been telling Cebuano stories consistently, maybe with different filmmaking styles and techniques, but we have recurring themes that are very representative of what it is to be a Bisaya.

For years now, it has been very convenient for us to call our film scene the Binisaya Movement. When I pitched the concept of Binisaya, as propaganda to build a film scene around, to Remton, Idden, and John Darcy Arguedo in a small apartment in Mabolo, Cebu City, around 2009, we were thinking of calling it "Cebuano New Wave." But then I realized that the term "New Wave" is not new anymore. So we decided to just call it Binisaya. It's shorter, and it sounds raw. It might be important to note that Darcy and Idden were also our classmates in the university.¹

Actually, "binisaya" is a term we borrowed from the faith healers in Cebu. If there is something that the doctor cannot cure, you go to the "quack" doctor. Basically, what we're trying to do here is to bring back the Cebuano faith in Cebuano cinema by celebrating Cebuano-made films in a space between a screen and a projector. A space, a screen, a projector, and people in between.

And because there is an audience, that means some people have to keep making films or else we'd be showing the same films over and over again.

From the time we mounted the first Binisaya screenings in 2009, the word "binisaya" has been thrown around to put a name to the entire

Cebuano filmmaking scene. Since 2011, this small group has turned into a community, and it has gotten bigger and bigger every year. The group is not only composed of filmmakers, but it also includes artists in other fields, musicians, visual artists, writers. The Binisaya crowd has consistently grown since then, and not only in Cebu but all over the country. People in Manila love Binisaya.²

PFC: Tell me more about the people behind the Binisaya Movement.

AC: As far as I'm aware, there are three important groups, and then there are various subgroups. There's Above the Line (ATL) Productions, 8Thumbs, and Panumduman Pictures. ATL rents equipment, but they compete with Winston Cabico, who also produces and does production management for commercials. There are also some people who mostly do commercials but sometimes also do narrative films or documentaries.

Ruel, I like to say, is the father of Cebuano digital cinema, because he mentored Christian, Remton, and Victor and still takes apprentices under his wing every now and then. He is primarily a cinematographer, but, to be honest, he directs the directors he works with. He also co-owns ATL, if I'm not mistaken. He's still very influential even if he rarely speaks up. He's primarily based in Manila now.

Keith, also based in Manila now, founded Binisaya and is very fatherly about it. If it's possible for him to run the show by himself, he will do so, even before asking people for help. Remton is amazingly talented, but because he has a hard time saying 'no' to anything, he is incredibly busy and hard to reach. He's an inspirer rather than a leader. Christian is popular with the kids because of *Superpsychocebu* and his shorts. Victor is also popular with the younger crowd, as he actively mentors college kids.

Bianca Balbuena is currently the top producer in Cebu. She first came in as the producer of Christian's *Aberya* (2012) and ended up producing for Remton, since Rem's previous producers, Bevlee Tañedo and Jiji Borlasa, already retired. Bambi Beltran, who acts and writes, used to be a cinema committee member of the NCCA and was a huge supporter of the Binisaya Movement.

Jill Yap runs ATL and is primarily a production manager. She, in my experience, has proven to be the most conscientious of the producers in Cebu, so far. Jiji Borlasa of ATL used to be one of the most prolific producers in Cebu. She also writes. She recently stopped producing to focus on teaching at University of the Philippines (UP) Cebu, so she now also has influence in the academe.

Misha Anissimov started the film school at USC and is mostly a

curator. He owns the Tioseco-Bohinc archive and is a huge supporter and influencer. Paul Grant, who teaches at the USC film program, is a historian and also a huge supporter and influencer. They're pretty influential, because they are able to reach out to so many people who would otherwise not talk to each other. And they're white. You know how people receive white people.

Ligaya Rabago is an actress and a professor at UP. Diem Judilla coordinates the film program at USC and is also very active in the community, bridging people and supporting events. To be honest, there are so many people, but off the top of my head, those are the names you can remember.

KD: I think Ara already talked about the big picture of the Cebuano filmmaking scene. Maybe I can talk about Binisaya as the film-watching community of Cebu. When Binisaya was transformed from a motley group of artists into a film festival in 2011, the idea was to make it a community. It's not about us or our films but about cinema. In organizing Binisaya, we thought of ourselves as the audience. We wanted to see more films made with passion; we just happened to be filmmakers ourselves.

The official members of the Binisaya Movement Inc., as registered in the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), are myself, Remton, Idden, Darcy, with the addition of Atty. Grace Lopez as official secretariat. The five of us work mostly at the backend of every festival; we make it a point that different organizations host the festival every year.

Because of this growing community, we've met a lot of people. I remember meeting Ara while we were making *Biyernes, Biyernes* for Binisaya 2011.

AC: Every year, a different group handles the festival, but people don't necessarily leave. That's why the community grows. The people behind the festival this year are myself, Christian, Paul, Danielle de los Reyes, who is the current chairperson of the Motion Picture Society of Cebu, and Mayan Benedicto, who is new to the film world.

KD: Having a strong united front that includes filmmakers and audiences is the fuel that moves Binisaya forward. It has been running on nothing but passion for seven years, and it is a huge milestone for the Cebuano film scene.³

AC: The film festival was born out of necessity. Otherwise, there would be nowhere to screen the films that were already being produced. *Biyernes, Biyernes, Sabado, Sabado* (2012), *Domingo, Domingo* (2013), *Lunes, Lunes* (2016), these films were created for the festival.

KD: I think the festival and the films are dependent on and independent of each other at the same time. The filmmakers work independent of the Binisaya film festival, because most of us make films for grant-giving festivals or institutions, or for ourselves. But we make Cebuano films, and Binisaya celebrates Cebuano films. So, in a way, by default, two things that are originally independent of each other become dependent on each other.

PFC: How do you perceive your place in the history of Cebuano cinema?

AC: I see my generation as a completely new thing, because we weren't mentored by the filmmakers of old; they didn't produce our films. The only connection that I can think of is geography.

KD: I don't think any of us grew up watching Cebuano films. We became aware that there was a 'golden age' of Cebuano cinema just recently, when we were already making films ourselves. It's a good thing that we have people like Paul and Misha, who are studying Cebuano film history. Because of them, we got to see the films from back then.

It is important to learn the past to become stronger and better for the future.

PFC: Describe the Cebuano filmmaking ethos.

AC: The storyteller is king, and story is God.

KD: Decentralization.

PFC: Would you say that there is a Cebuano kind of cinema that is set apart from other cinemas?

AC: There's a brand of humor that I have a hard time explaining.

KD: In my opinion, cinema is like love. It's universal except there may be different kinds love influenced by culture, geography, language, and politics. Cebuano cinema is no different. Cebuano Cinema is also Philippine Cinema. Cebuano cinema is cinema; we just happened to be Cebuanos.

But I agree with Ara about Cebuano humor.

PFC: What are your current challenges?

AC: There is a Cebuano film industry. A cottage industry, a micro-industry—call it what you will, but you cannot say it does not exist.

Now our problem with financing is that none of it is local. For the

past years, Cinema One Originals has sponsored our productions. They also end up owning the films. But Cinema One is a competition, and there is no guarantee that we'll get a project from them every year. So we encourage promising filmmakers to join. We teach them, we conduct workshops, we share our knowledge and contacts. We are definitely not exclusive. Every new director who gets a film made means jobs for all of us. The more films, the better.

Meanwhile, we pay the thirty per cent entertainment tax. Cebuano businessmen are conservative and look for hard investments. Unless it's a vanity project, people here aren't likely to spend for "art." And we do not have business, if we do not have an audience.

The Cebuano audience pays for American films. The Cebuano audience supports that economy. But when you pay for a Hollywood film, or any imported stuff, a percentage of our money goes to another country. Even if you aren't a nationalist or whatever, where's your sense of community? For the community to rise up to its best, you have to invest. Getting better takes time and effort. Effort has an opportunity cost. Being able to account for that opportunity cost means a continued investment.

We can only survive for so long on dole outs. But unless we have an audience, we have no business, and any and every attempt to #ReviveCebuanoCinema will fall flat. Furthermore, when we support films that tell *our* stories, we contribute to the preservation of our culture. We create documents of our humor, our fears, our dreams, our sensibility as a people. Nobody else will do that for us.

KD: We have the same problems as everyone else. All independent filmmakers are in the same boat. Technology has democratized filmmaking. Don't get me wrong; technology is a good thing, but the value of watching cinema has greatly decreased.

An issue I have with audience development is that the audience will only go see your film if it is screened at a convenient time and place. Prime time and within the city center—something that small-scale filmmakers cannot afford.

That is why we, as Binisaya, are taking cinema to the streets, hopefully to bring the "sexy" back in watching projected moving images onscreen or on a cemented wall.

There so many more I can enumerate, but I will stop here. I think struggle is important, because it gives meaning to whatever it is you are passionately doing.

PFC: How do you see Cebuano cinema in the future?

AC: Honestly? If the current stakeholders don't take responsibility, capitalism will take over and just churn out cheap comedies online.

KD: I am afraid of history repeating itself.

PFC: What are your current projects?

KD: Panumduman Pictures is hosting Binisaya 2017 on September 22 to 30, with Ara as the festival director. I am currently developing my next film, and it's going to be a blockbuster hit.

Notes

¹For a short history of the festival, see Grace Lopez, "Growing Binisaya Film Festival," *Cebu Daily News*, September 9, 2014, accessed May 30, 2017, <http://cebudailynews.inquirer.net/41955/growing-binisaya-film-festival>.

²For reflections by filmmaker John Torres on participating in the film festival, by film scholar Rose Roque on holding the Binisaya Film Festival in UP Manila, and by film curator Aiess Alonso on programming Binisaya films at the Vientianale, see *Sine Kultura* 10 (2016).

³To have a sense of the verve and spunk of the people behind the Binisaya Movement, check their YouTube channel, BINISAYAFEST, at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCs3zNSvl3QajK2C5v-2cf5A>.

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