

What I Did During the Reelvolution

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From the MMFF 2016 campaign poster to keep the films in the theaters.
Photos courtesy of Edward Cabagnot.

"The devil's in the details."

One of the more indelible film highlights of the 2010s was sparked by a scandal.

This scandal unleashed a tsunami of public outrage calling for the reevaluation of a high-profile annual film event and its much beleaguered governing body. It also ignited a vibrant, though short-lived, revolution—a #reelvolution that brought into sharp relief the relationship between an independent cinema bursting at its seams and the inertial forces of the profit-at-any-price mainstream.

We're talking, of course, about the *Honor Thy Father* scandal of 2015 that gave rise to the 42nd Metro Manila Film Festival (MMFF) of 2016 (a.k.a. The Year of Change) and its mother agency, the Metro Manila Development Authority (MMDA). Erik Matti's *Honor Thy Father*, a gritty thriller about a family who gets into trouble because of bad debts, was summarily disqualified just hours before the MMFF 2015 jurors sat for deliberation. The grounds for disqualification was in itself "sketchy"—nondisclosure for being the opening film of Cinema One Originals Film Festival—despite the producers claiming letters were submitted days prior the event. More interesting was the fact that it's only disqualified from competing in the Best Film category. Matti's oeuvre eventually bagged eight awards, including Best Director.

With the controversy having reached tabloid levels of publicity, "concerned" politicians were quick to jump into the fray and hastily called for a series of hearings. As a result of the *circus maxima*, the MMDA was categorically instructed to either "shape up or ship out"—the direst consequence being the possible dismantling of the industry's annual cash cow, the MMFF. This led to the resignation of most of its ExCom (Executive Committee) members, save for a couple of seats in order to maintain some level of continuity.

Perhaps at this point it's best to review what then made up the membership of the MMFF Executive Committee. Film sectors tend to be heterogeneous, with subsectors having varying goals, strategies, and missions. Thus, any long-running festival with a national scope strives for a balanced representation of its sectors. As in previous editions, the incoming 2016 ExCom included representatives from the government, including both Houses of the legislature, the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB), the Bureau of Broadcast Services (BBS), the Philippine National Police-National Capital Region Police Office (PNP NCRPO), and the Film Development Council of the Philippines (FDCP); from the private sector (made up mostly of key individuals representing facets of the industry, further subdivided into the creatives and the business people), including film producers, distributors, theatre owners/managers, film artists and craftsmen, and representatives of the burgeoning independent film sector; and from the academe. I've always referred to the synergy and balance

between the three as the driving force behind Cinemalaya's early successes.

The new ExCom sat down on March 29, 2016 at the MMDA Boardroom and was presided over by agency head, Atty. Murph Carlos. Still reeling from the 2015 debacle and the hearings that it engendered, the MMDA made it clear that any effort to revitalize the scandal-ridden festival should start from a clean slate—a tabula rasa.

The initial getting-to-know-you was supposed to last for only a couple of hours. It dragged on for eight.

The best thing that came out of this initial meeting was, because the newly installed members followed different polestars, the decision to do a re-Vision/Mission Workshop of the MMFF, with the hope of redefining its goals while taking into consideration its motley history as well as the needs of times, to find common ground from whence a new, revitalized version can arise.

To cut a long story short, the workshop results were groundbreaking. Despite their diverse backgrounds, the committee began by identifying two premises that would define the flow of the next two days:

1. "There are no enemies here." It was agreed that all present were after the same thing: the revitalization of the Metro Manila Film Festival; and, by extension, the further development of Philippine Cinema as a whole.
2. "A thing can be two things at the same time." During the very first session, it was agreed that artistic quality did not preclude commercial viability. In the words of Ms. Boots Anson-Rodrigo, "An excellent film does not automatically mean box-office poison. And vice-versa." This was a significant jumping point for subsequent discussions, particularly when it came to the two or three "usual suspects." It was decided that, first and foremost, the MMFF reboot shall be inclusive, blind to distinctions such as "indie" or mainstream, regional or not.

In practical terms, the most significant reformulations—to be reflected in its rules, regulations, mechanics, events, and timetable—were as follows:

1. Reinstating artistic excellence and not commercial viability as the primary criteria in the selection of entries for exhibition and competition. This came after revisiting the festival's history and its *raison d'être*.
2. Reverting to finished film submissions and not scripts. This was resolved for three reasons:
 - a. "It's prone to abuse," claimed distributor/producer Wilson Tieng, citing a particular case when the resultant film bore little resemblance to the selected script it was based on.
 - b. The MMFF is not a grant-giving festival like Cinemalaya, Cinema One Originals,

and QCinema, which monitor, in varying degrees, the production process of their grantees.

- c. Finally, at least as far as this writer knows, most other festivals require finished film submissions and not screenplays or works-in-progress.

The tweaked rules and regulations were released publicly at the beginning of June 2016. Entry to the 42nd edition of the MMFF would rely on the following: Story, Audience Appeal, and Overall Impact (40%); Cinematic Attributes and Technical Excellence (40%); Global Appeal (10%); and Filipino Sensibility (10%).

But by the October 31, 2016 deadline for “Letters of Intent” to join, the festival received a record number of submissions. These came from both big players and relative unknowns nationwide. The ExCom was still in its extended honeymoon stage, buoyed by the buzz of excitement that flooded social media regarding these submissions. This 20 September 2016 Facebook post from the *Saving Sally* team, which ends with a link to the *Saving Sally* trailer, sums it up very well:

So we submitted to MMFF today. There are over 60 projects vying for 8 slots. 7 of those slots will most likely go to the big players. The odds are tough. It's like trying to hit the moon with a slingshot. I just hope it's a fair fight. We have neither clout nor money. Just the film which we hope the panel would like and we get to fulfill our promise of sharing this film with you folks this year. Fingers crossed. For now we wait as we always have (Or do we make noise? Let MMFF know this is something people need to see? How do we even go about that?)

Indeed, the next job was making sure that the MMFF 2016 had a stellar Selection Committee. It took a while but a panel of worthy experts were soon assembled, chosen for their integrity and reformist spirit.

The Selection Committee waded through 27 finished film submissions, and the results of their intensive deliberations made MMFF history: *Ang Babae sa Septic Tank 2* (#ForeverIsNotEnough) by Marlon Rivera; *Die Beautiful* by Jun Lana; *Kabisera* by Arturo San Agustin and Real Florido; *Oro* by Alvin Yapan; *Saving Sally* by Avid Liongoren; *Seklusyon* by Erik Matti; *Sunday Beauty Queen* by Baby Ruth Villarama; and *Vince & Kath & James* by Ted Boborol. Some of the highlights of MMFF 2016 included the following:

1. Unsurprisingly, none of the “usual suspects” made it to the final eight.
2. For the first time in the 42 years of MMFF, a documentary, *Sunday Beauty Queen* by Baby Ruth Villarama made it to the finals. It also bagged the year's top prizes during the December 28, 2019 Gabi ng Parangal held at the New Frontier Theatre,

including Best Picture, Best Editing (Chuck Gutierrez) and the Gatpuno Antonio J. Villegas Cultural Award.

3. Possibly the MMFF entry with the longest production history (12 years in the making!), *Saving Sally* pushed the technical capabilities of Pinoy full-length animation by combining live action and 3D effects for a young-adult narrative.
4. A majority of the films tackled sociopolitical issues: the LGBTQ+ experience (*Die Beautiful*), extrajudicial killings and political corruption (*Kabisera*), the tension between a village's sustainability versus environmental imperatives (*Oro*), child abuse (*Saving Sally*), corruption in religion (*Seklusyon*), and, of course, the plight of overseas Filipino workers and domestic helpers (*Sunday Beauty Queen*).
5. Genres were well-represented: comedy (*Ang Babae sa Septik Tank 2*, *Die Beautiful*), romcom (*Vince and Kath and James*, *Saving Sally*), political thriller (*Oro*), family drama (*Kabisera*), and horror (*Seklusyon*).
6. One of the films, *Oro*, found itself in the middle of a controversy over the alleged killing of animals during the shoot. It was so widely publicized that it waylaid the January 24, 2017 Senate Hearings convened to evaluate MMFF 2016's reforms (and, specifically, its earnings).
7. The ongoing ascent of Pinoy regional cinema was most evident in the Shorts Category. Out of the eight titles—*Birds* by Christian Paolo Lat, *EJK* by Bor Ocampo, *Manila Scream* by Roque Lee and Blair Camilo, *Mga Bitoon sa Siudad* by Jarell Serencio, *Mitatang* by Arvin Jezer Gagui, *Momo* by Avid Liongoren, *Passage of Life* by Renz Vincemark Cruz and Hannah Daryl Gayapa, and *Sitsiritsit* by Brian Spencer Reyes—four hailed from the regions. *Birds* came from Cebu, *Mga Bitoon sa Siudad* from Davao, and *EJK* and *Mitatang* from Pampanga.
8. There was an increase in the level of social media discourse not just on the entries but also on the issues related to the conduct of the festival itself as well as to larger challenges defining the current Pinoy film scene.
9. Last, but certainly not the least, it proved that Pinoy audiences nationwide were hardly stupid, were fully capable of appreciating efforts that do not insult their intelligence, and were willing to make noise regarding the inequitable MMFF distribution scheme.

But as they say, “rust never sleeps.” The 42nd edition of the Metro Manila Film Festival, particularly its aftermath, pushed to the foreground the cracks and imperfections that define the sad state of Pinoy cinema. The forces of greed and entropy have an insidious way of eating away at things,



Festival postmortem with the MMFF 2016 Selection Committee: (L-R) Mae “Juana Change” Paner, Krip Yuson, Moira Lang, the author, Nic Tiongson, Krisma Fajardo, Joy Belmonte, and Law Fajardo.

including seemingly cohesive teams tasked to change the state of things. In the case of the MMFF 2016 ExCom, this came in stages.

The following months were poured into intensive meetings on a variety of festival concerns—logo design and theme song competitions, invitations to international jurors, guest appearances in various media, etc. But around mid-November, the ExCom was hit with the news that our theatrical partners were only giving the eight chosen entries a two-day no pull-out guarantee. That meant, after December 26, 2016, theatres can replace “underperforming” titles with ones with better box office potential.

Barely a month before the festival, this naturally came as a shock.

Again, let me reiterate: not a hint of this scenario was *openly* discussed during any of the previous meetings in months, the presumption being, since we were a change committee tasked to revitalize a corrupted festival, all sectors—since their representatives sat at the same table—would abide by our collective decision, or, at the very least, express sectoral concerns during these ExCom sessions so these can be addressed as one united body.

Nobody told us that certain sectors of the industry were above the rules set forth by the MMFF governing body, or were beyond honoring the very spirit of the festival/ completion—which means, at least in decent society, equitable treatment of all films. It was then we were hit with the realization regarding who actually called the shots of this festival, the true power behind its machinery.

The next stages happened in quick succession.

While the eight full-length films, along with their accompanying short films, were being “shuffled off” randomly to various destinations nationwide, we were made aware that



Senate Hearing on MMFF 2016 issues.

not all theatres were participating in the prescribed exhibition. Then, during our very first ExCom meeting in December, we were summarily informed by—and this is the unkindest blow of all—a fellow ExCom colleague that the MMFF would only run for ten days and not the usual two weeks. The reason cited was that this was the rule of law as specified by the POs creating the MMFF. Barely controlling her temper, Ms. Lang was quick to retort, “But the actual practice for decades has been 14 days? *Bakit ngayon lang?*”

But the saddest act of complicity was the ExCom's just shrugging its shoulders at the idea of non-MMFF titles—namely, *Super Parental Guidance* and *Enteng Kabisote 10*—being allowed to screen during the festival window, a window supposedly reserved for the final eight and its accompanying shorts.

After nine months of working with each other, all of a sudden we were appraised of our folly. Our impotence against market forces. The triumph of greed over reform.

How very naïve of us. To have gone through the process with good will, and all of a sudden. . . *Eat Bulaga!* At this point, the conspiracy theorist in me smelled the possibility of rats plotting in the dark, and of trusted colleagues whom we believed to be on the side of reform to be, in fact, among the shadow walkers.

By the end of January 2017, the MMFF was again brought up at the Senate hearing, this time to discuss the poor box office performance of the edition. But did MMFF really lose that much money? Upon scrutiny, the answer seems to be in the negative.

1. Non-MMFF titles were screened alongside the legitimate eight festival films. In past years, the final box office tallies included *all* titles screened

during the two-week window. Thus, a more accurate accounting of MMFF 2016 should include the other two titles to reflect a more accurate picture of total spending of Pinoy audiences during the said period.

2. There was no equitable distribution of screens for the eight titles. Some titles were shown preference by distributors and theatre owners because of perceived box office potential or other more secretive reasons. In certain regions, certain titles were never shown at all despite audience interest.
3. The best point raised in the brouhaha was that the edition was a success in terms of the total earnings of the legit eight versus the previous year's non-"usual suspects" titles.

Hence, the insistence that MMFF 2016 was a dismal failure is an example of fake news or selective reporting at best.

In any case, 2017 saw a return of the old guard. Adding insult to injury, the incoming ExCom added four seats devoted solely to theatre managers—for obvious reasons. By December 2017, the "usual suspects" were back in full swing. The gains of the #reelvolution of 2016 were short-lived, but it shone a light on the true relationship between the burgeoning indie film scene and the seemingly threatened mainstream.

Personally, I would say at this point that any attempt to reform a festival-cum-cash cow is an exercise in futility. But having said that, I think it's too important a sociopolitical/cultural ritual to simply dismiss as a lost cause. The implications of allowing certain powers-that-be to dictate "taste" and what should be watched by a general public—a public they've dismissed as incapable of improvement—is simply not right. One can connect the dots between such dangerous thinking with the current muddled state of Pinoy society.

A part of me believes maybe MMFF is truly a lost cause and should be junked completely before it does any further harm to the Pinoy psyche. But that, of course, means allowing Hollywood blockbusters their triumphal holiday return.

However, the gains of 2016 have proven that Pinoy audiences have, indeed, become more "woke," readier to fight for what they think they deserve, hungrier for a better deal. Thus the better attitude should be to retreat from the battle for now, allow the forces of change to replenish, and come back again to fight the good fight another day.

In the meantime, some takeaways:

1. True reform can only manifest if *all* parties sit together sans individual agendas and work for Philippine Cinema. Goals should include the encouragement of new talent, the creation of excellent works, and the development of a more enlightened audience nationwide.
2. If certain sectors refuse to cooperate, some degree of

legislative (or executive) intervention should be put in place. Formerly mentioned suggestions include

- a. no "first day/last day" imposition on Filipino films: they should be guaranteed at least four days to one week in the theaters;
 - b. moving opening days from Wednesday to Fridays as is the practice internationally to encourage weekend audiences;
 - c. expansion of the implementation of Senior Citizen, PWD, and other beneficiaries' movie-viewing benefits; and
 - d. changing the MMFF festival modus from a per-cinema arrangement to a festival type of programming where all films share the same theaters.
3. Create a system where private sector companies can work with the academe to create subsidized screenings through different strategies such as block sales, etc.
 4. Take advantage of the window to further audience development via post-screening Q&As in designated cinemas, as well as more involved in-site fora to encourage deeper levels of appreciation.
 5. Demand more transparency in the administrative and financial management of the festival.

This list names but a few possibilities. That "one brief shining moment" may seem lost, but it's forever etched in the hearts of all true lovers of Pinoy Cinema. A reminder that we've done it once. An inspiration that we can do it again.

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Philippine Cinema is Dead, Long Live Philippine Cinema!

Rolando B. Tolentino

