

Aria:

Reliving the Kapampangan Resistance Movement

Justine Dizon

It was 2 o'clock in the morning when I got a chat message from a friend who worked in the film industry. He asked me if I could play the role of an anti-Japanese guerrilla in a full-length feature being produced by Holy Angel University.

Guerrilla. The word, its spirit and essence, instantly put a grin on my face. If I cannot be one in real life, it would be an immense honor to be one on screen and to portray the life my paternal grandfather had. I asked my friend what the film was about and promised I would give him my reply soonest.

The film is called *Aria*, a reference to the long, accompanied song written for a solo voice in an opera or oratorio. It has two timelines. One tells the story of a prewar zarzuela star Pining (Liya Sarmiento) who falls in love with David (Jay Garcia), a labor union organizer with communist ideologies. The two find themselves fighting for workers' rights and joining the underground armed movement against the powerful Kapampangan elites and the Japanese invaders.

The second timeline is the present. *Aria* depicts the present struggles of former Hukbalahap guerillas who fought against the Japanese forces during the Second World War. During its Pampanga premiere in January 2019, *Aria* writer and Kapampangan historian Robby Tantingco spoke of the stories of war veterans, whose pensions from the government come in late or don't arrive at all.

Aria, being a period film, tells a truthful account of history: the plight of the Kapampangan working class against the greedy and oppressive bureaucrat-capitalists who eventually turned to become Japanese collaborators. But *Aria's* strength as a film doesn't only rest in its historical accuracy but also its relevance up to the present. I got to chat with my good friend and *Aria's* award-winning director Carlo Enciso Catu in a quaint bar under the Abacan bridge in Angeles City during a film showing-cum-donation drive for Taal survivors organized by Kapampangan filmmakers. Between short films and bottles of beer, Direk Carlo and I enthusiastically discussed how *Aria* can be a tool to reflect on our current political situation.

Decades have passed yet, despite the absence of Japanese occupation, the Filipino working class continues to struggle for liberation—this time under a different oppressor. In Pampanga and the rest of Central Luzon, the Philippine National Police, in partnership with the Philippine Economic Zone Authority, has started to put up stations inside various economic zones under the Joint Industrial Peace and

Concern Office. Authorities say this aims to monitor and, eventually, prohibit the formation of labor unions as they are said to be recruitment grounds of the CPP-NPA-NDF. The Commission on Human Rights already warned against this policy, reminding the government that it is everyone's right to join or form a union as guaranteed by the constitution.

Bureaucrat-capitalism continues to be a problem in Philippine society, along with imperialism and feudalism. Present collaborators, mostly those from the government, may not be working with Japanese soldiers anymore but with different aggressors and ruling powers disguised as "foreign investors." While foreign military forces are not anymore present I our territory, the influence of imperialist countries continue to impact our economy. Meanwhile, peasants and workers remain at the mercy of landlords and capitalists as depicted in the film.

In this present situation, *Aria* is indeed a reminder of how the proletarian movement once struggled and continues to struggle not only for the interest of the labor sector but for the rest of the Filipino people. It also speaks about why it is justifiable to take up arms against the autocrats to achieve liberation and, on the individual level, self-actualization.

For Direk Carlo Catu, *Aria* represents a historic moment in Kapampangan history which tells why we continue to contend with conditions caused by the worker-capitalist relationship. It also gives us a glimpse on how we can remove our chains and move forward to the realization of our democratic aspirations as a sovereign nation.

It was seven o'clock in the evening, and I was seated in a corner chair inside a jam-packed theatre in Clark, Pampanga. Socialites, students, members of the academe, cultural workers, and fellow journalists all gathered to witness *Aria's* first ever homecoming.

The guerrilla scene, which I had glimpsed in part through the script, flashed on the big screen. I wasn't there. I wasn't able to say yes to the role offered to me due to the daily grind in our news organization.

But despite my absence from that sequence, I was able to see myself in the whole film—a Kapampangan, a worker, someone thirsty for freedom, and someone who will make sure to get it. That's more than an honor for me.

Opposite page:
Kumander Liwayway (Cindy Lapid), known for wearing red lipstick during battles, is a high-ranking official of the Hukbalap.
Photos courtesy of Carlo Enciso Catu.

Huk guerrillas led by Kumander Liwayway enjoy a night of music by the bonfire.

Justine Dizon is a Kapampangan community journalist who used to write for the Philippine Daily Inquirer and CNN Philippines before rejoining local TV station CLTV36 in Central Luzon. He has done several short films and now focuses on his journalistic practice, pursuing a master's degree in Journalism at the Ateneo de Manila University.