

# BINISAYA: Ebb and Flow

Mariya Lim

Exquisite corpse is a surrealist game among artists where one sheet of paper is divided into equal sections from top to bottom. Each artist takes turns drawing or writing within their assigned space, folding the paper before passing it on, ensuring that their work is unexposed until everyone has contributed. The resulting “cadaver” appears oftentimes strange yet oddly cohesive.

The *Adlaw Adlaw* series is Binisaya Film Festival’s version of exquisite corpse. Here, pre-picked directors collaborate on omnibus films named after a day in a week. The first of these anthologies was *Biyernes Biyernes*, premiered in 2011.

The 48-Hour Shootout is a recurring, albeit less regular, side program of Binisaya. Within two days, small teams are to write, shoot, and edit a short film built around a specific genre or theme. Does it glamorize the inhumane working hours of actual productions? That’s a buzzkill discussion for another day, but cinema served Amazing Race-style is undeniably a crowd hit of a gimmick. Like the 48-Hour Shootout, *Adlaw Adlaw* is a participatory platform that demystifies movie-making. Unlike it, there are no required props or lines, no on-the-dot deadlines and no prizes to win. *Adlaw Adlaw* is a slower burn, deeper dive into the craft. From directors with day jobs to film students to names better known in other media, the series connects disjointed individuals. Here’s hoping there would be some spillover in support for film folk after Cebu’s recent designation as a UNESCO Creative City of Design.

Binisaya has always positioned itself as a place that nurtures distinct voices. Over the years, the films in competition and exhibition have continuously challenged sensibilities in the same city that hosts the Sinulog Short Film Festival. The latter showcases documentary and narrative family fare that align with the larger religious and cultural event held every January. Where Sinulog is the one-dimensional celebration of a sanitized colonial history, Binisaya highlights the gritty and encourages what’s weird. What Binisaya lacks in manpower and funding, it compensates with a unique prestige: it is a festival for and by filmmakers.

2017’s *Martes Martes* was produced by a particularly young batch. It also had a twist, setting it apart from previous and succeeding editions: a pre-production workshop by the beach, tying in nicely with Binisaya’s logo of repeating waves in lieu of laurel leaves. At that multi-day film lab, the directors and their teams developed their concepts with mentors, before shooting around the area. The finished shorts were then strung together as one feature and premiered as part of the opening program. Binisaya is slow to ride along this trend of film camps, despite its touristic Cebu base. Other locales have succeeded in inviting weary capital-based professionals to take working vacations through these incubators.

Who then gets to seize the day? With *Adlaw Adlaw*, you usually do not elect yourself, you are chosen. The selection process is similar to the content. There is a suggestion of some standard in either storyline or style, but the exact coordinates will elude you. Is there a meaning behind the repeating title? Are the films supposed to occur on the same day, in one cinematic universe? Anything goes, so nothing is ever clearly defined or rigorously enforced, perhaps to preserve the Binisaya signature of punk-presenting nonchalance. The couldn’t-care-less irreverence peaked in 2018.

For cinematheque-less Cebuanos, the next best option is still the mall movie theater, which is hard to fill and expensive to secure. To counter this, Binisaya has developed a habit of repurposing public spaces as alternative screening venues. In school auditoriums, art galleries, food parks, backyards, and basketball courts—even as a caravan fashioned after agit-trains that tour remote barangays—all it takes is a laptop and a projector. However compromised the viewing setup may be, these makeshift accessible substitutes aren’t total downgrades. Taken out of sterile, perfectly controlled boxes, the movie night is transformed, turned into an interdisciplinary thing of purer storytelling.

It brings to mind the terms “inato” and “kinowboy” which can typically be heard in social gatherings that involve food. They’re announced before guests to help manage expectations or downplay preparations with unobtrusive humility. It’s a tropical, less romantic take on the Danish concept of *hygge*, with an emphasis on roughing it and making do with what’s available. So just how committed is Binisaya to this ethos? A one-time yacht club press launch would suggest it is

not opposed to going off-brand every now and then. The 2019 installment of *Adlaw Adlaw* is an Arri Alexa-shot triptych on the drug war beyond urban centers. The polished *Hurwebes Hurwebes* is a stark step up compared to every Day Day that came before it, just as the directors Don Frasco, Kris Villarino, and Januar Yap aren’t neophytes the way their predecessors were.

Now that Binisaya is a decade old, it’s wise to reflect on its tendencies and inconsistencies for the benefit of the following: those who wish to pattern themselves after their model, and the ones with more single-minded programming who want to learn how to do it differently. While Binisaya’s recent run was rather political, it has been a purveyor of other things, like so-called Bisaya humor and experimental-leaning, gratuitously glitchy films. Its scope covers the parts of Visayas and Mindanao that speak the same language, but it would be disingenuous to deny the Cebu-centric favoritism. There should be space, room, a seat at the table for underrepresented provinces. After all, Binisaya is one of the festivals that field regional films into the national Cinema Rehiyon. A counterculture that stands up against the mainstream is still capable of gatekeeping, especially when there are even smaller players excluded.

To clarify, there is no civil war or coup behind the scenes, no public furor over the movement. This analysis of a perceived identity crisis could be nothing more than growing pains. When there’s an annual moving-up, moving-on ceremony from one festival director to another, the vision-mission cannot realistically stay intact. Moving forward, can we expect Binisaya with a genre focus? Binisaya in social realist drama advocacy mode? Binisaya, but exclusively video art and virtual reality?

As a seasonal volunteer and all-around errand girl, I’m not privy to the planning, assuming that’s happening already. I do know though that while the in-house culture here is more last-minute than long-term, the show somehow does go on. The disarray—initially unintended—is repackaged as a planned accident, an orchestrated mess. Fans from afar and followers up close need not worry. The shapeshifters shall return.

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A virgin makes a deal with the devil in Neil Nanta’s “Pisting Yawa” for *Miyerkules Miyerkules* (2018).

Opposite page: Quirky content and coloration: A still from Christyl Abellaneda’s “Draft\_gikapoy nakooooo,” a short film from *Martes Martes* (2017). Photos courtesy of Mariya Lim.