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Opposite page: Acuña and Nepomuceno in their later years.
Courtesy of Nadi Tofighian.

“CALL IT TEAM:”

Isabel Acuña and the Gendered History of Early Film Partnership¹

Nadi Tofighian

In the 1932-1933 edition of *Rosenstock's Manila City Directory*, Isabel Acuña, or Isabel de Nepomuceno (the entry identifies her by her married name), is listed as the vice president of the newly formed Malayan Pictures Corporation.² Yet, current research and historiographical accounts have hitherto overlooked Acuña's status in the early Filipino film industry, placing her in an ancillary role as helper and assistant. Most film historians have downplayed her impact on and contributions to the development of early cinema in the Philippines. She is omitted from Lena Strait Pareja's 1998 study on women in early Filipino cinema.³ In my earlier work on José Nepomuceno and his influence in creating a Filipino national consciousness, Isabel Acuña is not mentioned either.⁴ Nick Deocampo, on the other hand, identifies some of Isabel Acuña's many responsibilities, but repeatedly defines her through her marital status rather than her professional accomplishments: “The labor to produce film was divided between the Nepomuceno brothers and even Jose's wife, Isabel Acuña of Iloilo. [...] Jose's wife was the company's treasurer, casting directress, and hair and makeup supervisor.”⁵

The case of Isabel Acuña is a vivid illustration of how women around the world historically have been excluded from film historiography. Writing about the classical Hollywood era, Erin Hill suggests that women's involvement in cinematic industry has been systematically undermined, not dissimilar to “women's work” in other fields: “Women were never absent from film history; they often simply weren't documented as part of it because they did ‘women's work,’ which was—by definition—insignificant, tedious, low status, and noncreative.”⁶ The past decade or so has seen a concerted and an increased effort to revisit the role of women in film history, and make their invaluable contributions visible.⁷

Isabel Acuña (January 28, 1904 – September 15, 1986) met José Nepomuceno in Manila in 1920 through her brother who had been Nepomuceno's classmate at San Beda College.⁸ Nepomuceno was shooting his third feature film, *Un Capello Marchito* (*The Wilted Rosebud*, 1920), at the time, and Isabel Acuña's younger sister, Luisa Acuña, was starring in the film. Three years previously, Nepomuceno founded Malayan Movies together with his brother, Jesús Nepomuceno, in Manila, where they had previously run a successful

photography studio. Two years later, they made the earliest known fiction film created by a Filipino director, *Dalagang Bukid* (*Country Maiden*, 1919).⁹ Although Nepomuceno's cinematic career was remarkably fruitful, with around 80 films, it is currently believed that none of them survived.¹⁰ This, together with the lack of existing production notes, has made it practically impossible to track the evolution of Isabel Acuña's involvement in the production of these films.

Acuña and Nepomuceno married on June 6, 1920 at the Quiapo Church in Manila a few months after their first meeting. From that time forward, Acuña was involved in the filmmaking process of Malayan Movies. Initially, she primarily worked on costume design and makeup. She was instrumental in elevating the role of costume design and makeup, which became important not only for character construction and development, but also for the mise-en-scène of the film. She is reported to have spent hours on the streets, in bazaars, and in movie houses conducting research on costumes and set designs,¹¹ which helped her to formulate her own innovative ideas for the mise-en-scène. At the time, the issue of women's costumes, on the screen but primarily on stage, was occasionally discussed in the Filipino press. In an interview with Harry Wardell, the manager of Al Jolson, he was asked about his opinion on the vaudeville shows at Rivoli and Savoy: “his first criticism was that the girls on the stage here put on too much dress, and most of them are badly dressed.”¹²

In addition to her attempts to modernize the design of costumes and makeup of the film cast to speak to contemporary audiences, Acuña insisted on using simple words in the dialogue and intertitles to make the films more widely accessible. She took up the role of an informal censor at Malayan Movies as she required no dirty language, as well as keeping a lookout for inappropriate scenes. As a casting director, she was particularly adept at recruiting young actresses. The skill included convincing parents to permit their daughters to be on the screen as many still looked down on cinema as an art form.¹³ The Filipino press of the time gushed about the powerful roles of Hollywood casting directors, who were presented as makers and breakers of dreams. The weekly journal *Graphic*, formed in July 1927, reports: “Talented singers and ambitious young men and women go there. They all have one common aim to break into the silver screen. But there's nothing sure in Hollywood. Uncertainty hangs heavily

around the casting director's waiting room.”¹⁴ *Graphic*, with its focus on visual culture, Hollywood, and movie stars, had numerous stories about Hollywood's job market and “movie-struck girls begging casting directors for jobs.”¹⁵ The persistent interest in the inner workings of the U.S. film industry did not extend to local cinema production and its major players received much less coverage. Although Isabel Acuña shared duties with her Hollywood counterparts, she was not recognized as a casting director by contemporary press, and her important contributions on that front were neglected.

In my archival research on Filipino newspapers, I found two early articles mentioning Isabel Acuña, both published in *Graphic*. A 1928 article titled “Stars that Shine in Philippine Filmhood” provides a brief account of Acuña's role in casting 15-year-old Eva Lyn for José Nepomuceno's hugely successful film *La Mujer Filipina* (*The Filipino Woman*, 1927). Her sudden appearance in the text, not accompanied by a proper introduction, does not fully describe Acuña's central role within the casting process, “Miss Lyn is the type the movie director was looking for, but the fact that her hair is bobbed almost spelled disaster to her movie career. ‘I almost lost out,’ to use her very words. But Mrs. Nepomuceno came to her rescue by suggesting that she wear a wig, and she landed the job.”¹⁶ Similarly, the second article, a 1931 biographical portrait of José Nepomuceno, is telling in the limited role it ascribes to Acuña: “The pioneer film producer, Nepomuceno, married the former Miss Isabel Acuña, sister of Consuelo (Monina) Acuña, Miss Philippines, 1930, on June 6, 1920. The Nepomucenos have seven children.”¹⁷ Here, she is presented as a sister of a beauty queen, a wife of a famous film director, and a mother, with her contributions to the filmmaking process entirely omitted.

A number of articles published in the Filipino press drew attention to the danger the local suffragette movement (women received the right to vote in 1933) and women in creative industries could bring upon traditional gender roles: “Why should we clamor for greater emancipation when the Filipino woman, as she is today, is not a slave, but is still the queen of the home and the princess before her husband's eyes?”¹⁸ Although some articles attempted to challenge the role of a woman as the queen of the home and instead made her the queen of a workplace “prominent in the professions,”¹⁹ these pieces were outnumbered by articles doubting women's professional capabilities. Titles of such articles include “Is Woman Man's Inferior?”, “Is the Modern Filipino Girl as Bad as All That?”, and “What Women Talk About” (the answer here was supposedly babies, education, and dresses).²⁰

Acuña’s role in the Filipino film industry is subsumed by her being part of the prominent Nepomuceno family. Acuña’s range of responsibilities in the studio and during the filmmaking process increased over time. In the 1920s, she worked as a casting director, costume designer, art director, set decorator, and makeup supervisor in the productions of Malayan Movies. The company was the main film producer in the Philippines during the silent era and was largely a family-run business, with the company offices being on the same address, 247 General Solano in Quiapo, as the family residence.²¹ In 1931, the company was dissolved, and in its place, Malayan Pictures Corporation was formed. Isabel de Nepomuceno was listed as the vice president of the new company in the Manila city directory.²² Throughout the 1920s, her name was not mentioned in the city directories’ entries for Malayan Movies. Further research is required to shed light on her enigmatic promotion to the position of vice president and her responsibilities at Malayan Pictures Corporation.

In a 1983 book on José Nepomuceno, Joe Quirino writes about Isabel Acuña’s long workdays, her unfailing presence on set, and how she “did most of the preparatory work before any actual shooting started.”²³ In this book, Quirino repeatedly calls her “the right hand and left hand” of her husband.²⁴ In a rare 1981 interview,²⁵ Acuña describes her role in the film production process as a partner within the Nepomuceno-owned companies and José Nepomuceno’s life-long collaborator: “He had always wanted me to work side by side with him in our film projects. So he taught me the rudiments of casting, scriptwriting, production design and even art direction. That’s why in the States I was considered the first casting director in the Philippines.”²⁶

In this interview, Isabel Acuña challenges an assumption prevalent in Filipino film history that she played a supporting role in Nepomuceno’s ventures. Instead, she speaks

about her work as a valuable contribution to her and José Nepomuceno’s joint projects. Moreover, she asserts that one of her chosen areas of specialization—casting—has secured her an international fame within early film history.

This status as the first Filipino casting director, reportedly attributed to Acuña in the United States, is not part of the history of her contributions to the film industry in her native country. Although it has now become clear that Acuña was an early film pioneer in the Philippines and was highly involved in the production process of Nepomuceno’s films, she continues to be referred to, if at all, as the wife of an important film director. As a result of working in the shadow of her famed husband, much of her work has not been documented, nor has it been properly credited. Further research is required to rectify this lacuna in Filipino film history and to reveal the details of Acuña’s involvement in specific films, as well as her various roles in the history of Filipino film production.

This essay attempts to restore Isabel Acuña’s place as a recognized partner in the Nepomuceno film production companies, the place she rightfully claimed in 1981, when she told the interviewer: “The film projects we undertook were really husband-wife venture, or call it team.”²⁷

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Avie Felix

1 This essay is a longer reworked version of a profile I wrote on Isabel Acuña for Columbia University’s *Women Film Pioneers Project*. Available here: <https://wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu/pioneer/isabel-acuna/> (accessed August 17, 2020).
2 *Rosenstock’s Manila City Directory 1932–1933* (Manila: Philippine Education Co., 1932).
3 Lena Strait Pareja, *Roles and Images of Woman in the Early Years of Philippine Cinema 1912–1941* (PhD Dissertation, University of the Philippines Diliman, 1998).
4 Nadi Tofghian, “José Nepomuceno and the Creation of a Filipino National Consciousness,” *Film History* 20.1 (2008): 77–94.
5 Nick Deocampo, *Cine: Spanish Influences on Early Cinema in the Philippines* (Manila: National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 2003), 257.
6 Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women’s Work in Media Production* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 5.
7 See, for instance, Sofia Bull and Astrid Söderbergh Widding, eds. *Not so Silent: Women in Cinema before Sound* (Stockholm: Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, 2010); Jane Gaines, *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018); Ingrid Stigsdotter, ed. *Making the Invisible Visible: Reclaiming Women’s Agency in Swedish Film History and Beyond* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2019).
8 George Vail Kabrisante, “Jose Nepomuceno: The Father of R.P. Movies,” *Jingle Extra Hot Movie Entertainment Magazine*, May 4, 1981.
9 The issue of the earliest “Filipino” film is discussed and problematized by Patrick F. Campos in *The End of National Cinema: Filipino Film at the Turn of the Century* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2016); Charles Musser in “Nationalism, Contradiction, and Identity; or, A Reconsideration of Early Cinema in the Philippines,” *Early Cinema in Asia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017); Nick Deocampo and others.
10 A few years ago, the independent film historian Teddy Co found a film accredited to a certain “Josh Nelson” and filmed around Zamboanga City in Mindanao. This film bears many similarities to José Nepomuceno’s lost *Moro Pirates* (1931).
11 Joe Quirino, *Don José and the Early Philippine Cinema* (Quezon City: Phoenix Publishing House Inc., 1983), 23.
12 Nicasio Osmeña, “Broadway Theatrical Expert Talks on Filipino Women”, *Graphic*, August 27, 1927, 3.

13 Kabrisante; Quirino, 5, 22.
14 Elisabeth Cooper, “Meeting the Stars in Hollywood,” *Graphic*, October 22, 1927, 4.
15 Lolita Sollee, “Movieland As Is,” *Graphic*, March 17, 1928.
16 M. San Martin, “Stars that Shine in Philippine Filmdom,” *Graphic*, October 20, 1928, 3.
17 “Who is Who in the Philippines: A Biographical Sketch of Jose Nepomuceno, Pioneer Filipino Film Producer,” *Graphic*, September 2, 1931, 16. The couple later had an eighth child. All their children appeared in their films, and their son Angelito became a popular child actor. Another son, Luis, became a famous film director and producer, and made *Dabil Sa Isang Bulaklak* (*Because of a Flower*, 1967), *Igorota* (1968), and *The Pacific Connection* (1974), among others.
18 Amparo M. Neri, “Women Suffrage Synonym of Divorce and Flapperism,” *Graphic*, December 31, 1927, 12.
19 Ildefonsa C. Osias, “The Changing Status of the Filipino Woman: ‘Weaker Sex’ Doing its Bit in the Advancement of People and Country,” *Graphic*, December 17, 1927, 10–11.
20 “Is Woman Man’s Inferior?” *Graphic*, January 7, 1928, 9; Nieves Baens, “Is the Modern Filipino Girl as Bad as All That?” *Graphic*, January 28, 1928, 3; Virginia Pradas, “What Women Talk About,” *Graphic*, March 3, 1928, 7. Also see Tofghian, 88–89.
21 “Who is Who in the Philippines: A Biographical Sketch of Jose Nepomuceno, Pioneer Filipino Film Producer,” *Graphic*, September 2, 1931, 16.
22 *Rosenstock’s Manila City Directory 1932–1933* (Manila: Philippine Education Co., 1932).
23 Quirino, 23.
24 Quirino, 22, 71.
25 Kabrisante writes, “To meet Doña Isabel Zaldarriaga y Acuña for an interview is indeed a rare opportunity. For the past years, Doña Isabel Nepomuceno kept herself in low profile for some sentimental reasons. ‘So far you are the first to interview me about Mr. Nepomuceno’ (she calls her late husband Mr.), she told us.”
26 Kabrisante.
27 Kabrisante.