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A glance into the personal films (and life) of Filipino filmmaker John Torres

Article by Alexis A. Tioseco

Tawidgutom (3 mins)

Salat (12 mins)

Kung Paano Kita Liligawan Nang Di Kumakapit Sa Iyo?(13 mins)

- *(English Title: How Can I Court You Without Ever Holding You)*

He speaks in a hushed tone, and is relatively unremarkable in stature and appearance, but filipino filmmaker John Torres has been making noise. His ‘Love Films’, three short first-person non-fiction works, have moved audiences in Manila and Singapore, and served as the medicine for this own heartache.

Personal filmmaking has been around since the early days of cinema. Though what once existed mostly in the realms of the avant-garde is now, with the insurgence in popularity of ‘documentary’ films (Michael Moore’s propoganda *Fahrenheit 911* and *Bowling For Columbine* and Ramona Diaz’s *Imelda* prime examples) and the onset of the age of reality television, receiving much more mainstream attention.

2003 saw three extremely personal works of varied nature making headlines internationally, as they raked in awards at festivals and moved audiences around the globe. Each were made under unique circumstances. Illegitimate son Nathaniel S. Kahn explores the life of his father Louis Kahn in *My Architect*, attempting to understand the man by understanding his work; the filmmaker directly sets out to explore a subject. Andrew Jarecki’s *Capturing the Freidman’s* is a harrowing documentary about the child molestation scandal surrounding Arnold Freidman and his son Jesse, featuring astonishingly intimate footage shot by other son, David Freidman; the filmmaker utilizes events recorded by another to create his work. Jonathan Caouette’s painfully personal home-video/life-story *Tarnation*, edited using Mac’s iMovie software and referred to lovingly as “the shit” by an enthusiastic Gus Van Sant (who eventually signed on as Executive Producer along with *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* director John Cameron Mitchell), has been genuinely moving audiences around the world; the filmmaker cuts together pieces of his own past in search for catharsis in the present.

It is in the category of Caoutte’s *Tarnation* that the short films of John Torres’ fall.

John Torres’ ‘Love Films’ had their international premiere at the Singapore International Film Festival this past May. I had known Torres before he made these films, but not on intimate basis. *Indiefilipino.com*, the website for which I write regularly (temporarily down as of this writing, June 2005), had held a screening of local independent films at his studio-cum-mini-theater *Los Otros*. He was amiable, sincere, and accomodating, though we never once spoke about our personal lives. All the more it came as a shock when, months after meeting, there I sat, not more than a few feet away from the introverted Torres, listening and watching in disbelief as his soul spilled, naked and vulnerable, onto the television monitor.

Films like Caouette’s and Torres’ aren’t ones you make out of pleasure. They aren’t calculated forays into the world of filmmaking, and they they aren’t carefully crafted stories with ideas that their maker wants to express. They were assembled from and by emotion, and it is because of this that they are best, and most often, received on an emotional level.

These films were born out of pain. A hollow aching pain that pierces straight to the heart and leaves one (if he/she is an artist such as Torres is) with no suitable form of release other than through his craft. One can picture the author spending many silent nights alone in his workspace repeatedly viewing the captured remnants of his past relationship (I use the term author purposely as each short’s narrative is driven by the words and voice of Torres, recited to the tune of images both found and organized). It is their story, that of he and his ex-girlfriend, that provides the motivation for the trilogy, and functions as the emotional center that ties the separate films together; creating a moving treatise on love, heartbreak, and emancipation.

The first, *Tawidgutom*, speaks of the night, longing, and distraction, as it dances like a child with the moon around issues of pain, loss, and vulnerability. The second, *Salat*, is a series of vignettes, each separated by title, in which Torres begins to deal directly with his loss. It is in the vignette *Kulob* that he introduces us to the object of his depression. The third and final short, *Kung Paano...* is much more upbeat, with a jazzy score and retro style font titles; showing us the filmmaker beginning to take respite from his scenario, as he comments on the predicaments of his friends in somewhat of a video letter.

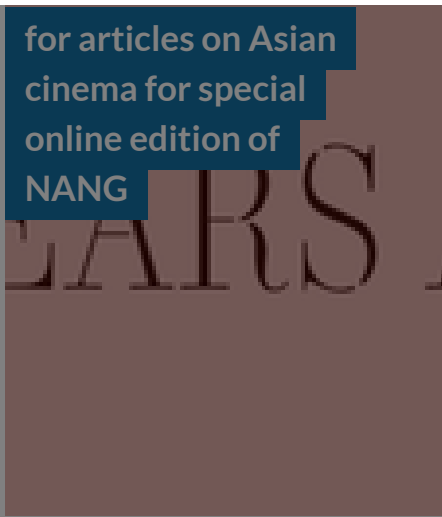
[SIFF](#) head-programmer Philip Cheah spoke enthusiastically about Torres’ work, saying that they reminded him of the excitement he felt when he first saw pinoy cinematographer Regiben Romana’s shorts. One can understand his enthusiasm. Stripped down bare aesthetically and even more emotionally, Torres turns the video camera on and inside himself as well as those close to him, creating, through the fusion of found footage, organized footage, and a somber introspective voiceover, some of the most heartbreakingly beautiful video poems you will ever see. In one particularly moving scene in the *Kulob* chapter of *Salat*, John and his (after more spending more than half his life with her, now) ex-girlfriend are on screen, directly addressing the camera. He coerces her into a game she is familiar with, asking her to cry on cue. Angled perpendicularly and positioned not more than a few inches away, he stares directly at her, unflinching. She, aligned at the center of the camera, turns slightly to meet his stare, as music from playing in another room blares in the background. Not more than a few seconds pass before her eyes begin to well-up, her gaze un-focus, and, as Torres the filmmaker mutes the sound and sets the images to slow motion, tears slowly stream down her face. Are they genuine or phony? Real or fake? The answer becomes irrelevant; the pain of the filmmaker is sincere.

It is this humble sincerity, in Torres’ words, the inflection of his voice, and purity of his images, that anchors his films and make them so unique, so special. Susan Sontag once wrote: *“The best emotions to write out of are anger and fear or dread. The least energizing emotion to write out of is admiration. It is very difficult to write out of because the basic feeling that goes with admiration is a passive comtemplative mood”*. From Shakespeare to Neruda, some of the worlds most memorable poets were ones that wrote of sadness and described longing in such vivid and moving detail. The ‘Love Films’ of Torres belong in the realm of these. If I’ve failed to describe them adequately, I apologize. Though I’m sure Sontag would understand.

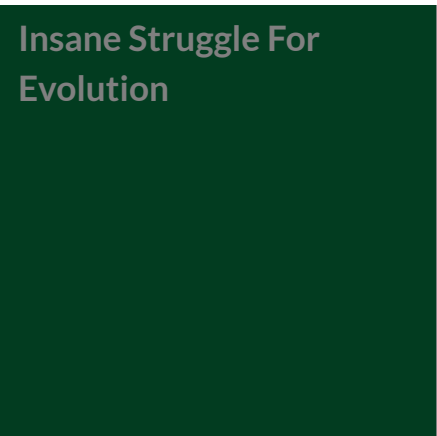
Alexis A. Tioseco has contributed to various publications including the Philippine Daily Inquirer, the Philippine Star and Senses of Cinema.com; and is a staff critic for the website Indiefilipino.com. He was one of 8 critics to participate in the Berlinale Talent Press 2005.

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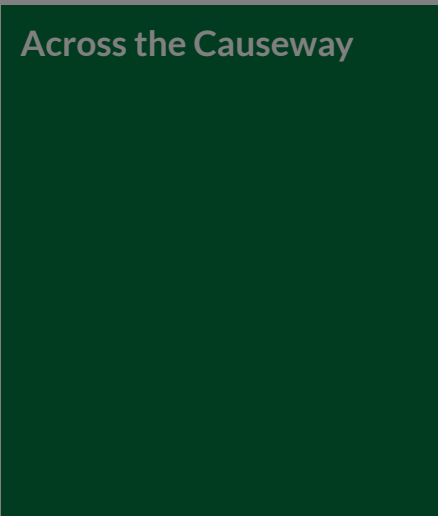
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