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Mendoza,

## Part 2



*Here's the second-part of an exclusive interview of the much-touted enfant terrible of Pinoy indies, Brillante Mendoza.*

**EV:** Now I would like to move on to *The Execution of P*. This has to be, at least for me, your most visual film. It's the kind of film that even if you turn off the audio you can still understand what's going on. How did you come up with that approach?

**BM:** It's interesting you mentioned that because when I edit my films, and not just this one, I always turn off the volume to see if it still makes sense even without the sound. As you can see, most of my films have very little dialogue and I usually allow my actors to improvise. Film is primarily a visual medium so as a filmmaker, it's important for you to know how to tell your story visually. *The Execution of P* is more challenging for me because it's illogical for Coco Martin's character, Peping, who's studying to become a policeman, to verbalize his fear, his anxiety. He couldn't even tell his friend, Abyong, because Abyong is part of all this, so he's trapped. In the script it's very easy to read that he's getting scared and he's nervous, but how will you show that on film? So I thought the only way is through the look on Coco's face.

**EV:** I especially like the way Coco's character changed in the course of the film. At the beginning he was this innocent young student and by the end of the film, he has practically become an accessory to a heinous crime. Furthermore, this crime has been committed by senior police officers so it's like he has caught a glimpse of what his future as a policeman might be like. I think it's interesting the way you

established that.

**BM:** There were several details that I wanted to inject at the beginning so that the audience will empathize with Peping as the story progresses. The conversation between Peping and his live-in girlfriend at the beginning of the film suggests that they were having problems with money. We also see that in the restaurant scene where he pocketed the tip that was intended for the waiter. Then there's the scene inside the van when he went out with his relatives, in other words, his family. Then later in the film he gets into another van with his friend, Abyong. That was a major turning point for him because inside this van is his new family, this group of corrupt policemen who are involved in drugs and prostitution.

**EV:** What I also find refreshing in your films is that you deal with serious subject matters and yet you always have a scene that's very comical, but not in the traditional sense. There's the pretty girl who dropped her dentures in *Slingshot*, the goat that suddenly "invaded" the movie theater in *Service* and here you have the municipal judge in Peping and Cecille's civil wedding, played with perfect comic timing by Lou Veloso. Was that improvised?

**BM:** Well, the dialogue was written in the script but I guess it's in the way Lou played it. What I wanted to do in that scene is to comment on the whole idea of marriage and how some Filipinos take it for granted these days, like the municipal judge who married Peping and Cecille. Because getting married in a church has become so expensive these days, a lot of couples just opt for a civil wedding. I can imagine the municipal judge doing this almost every day for God knows how many years and it has become routine already. Even Peping and Cecille and their guests did not take it seriously anymore because they are already living together and they have a baby, so it's purely for formalities' sake.

**EV:** With that in mind, I think we can also look at *The Execution of P* as a reflection of how we Filipinos have come to bastardize certain institutions that we used to hold sacred, like marriage. There is also the institution of the police. We used to believe that the police are here to "protect and serve" the people but now some of them have become the same as the criminals that they're supposed to hunt.

**BM:** Yes, that's right. To a certain degree these institutions have failed us.

**EV:** I read Roger Ebert's review of *The Execution of P*. He said that he liked *Service* but he found it hard to appreciate *The Execution* because most of it was so dark that he couldn't see the actors' faces. Why did you decide to shoot the film that way?

**BM:** First of all, for this film, the overall story and theme are more important than the individual characters. Peping is the only important character. For the rest, especially the policemen inside the van, I didn't see the need to properly introduce them one by one. Whether we see their face or not is irrelevant, what's important is that as soon as Peping got into the van with these murderers, it slowly dawns on him that he has made a mistake. He should have said goodbye to Abyong and gone straight home. But now it's too late. So in other words, the situation he's in at that point is more important for me than showing the faces of the actors.

**EV:** I guess some critics are so used to the Hollywood style where everything has to be well lit. But for me I think you did right with this film because it can be read as a metaphor for Peping's descent into this dark and evil world.

**BM:** That's right. Because I wanted to convey the idea that Peping lost his innocence that night. At the beginning of the film everything is well lit. We see Peping as a student studying to become a policeman, we see him with his girlfriend and their baby, we see them get married, it was all so innocent. Later in the film when he sees his friend Abyong he knows at the back of his mind that what his friend does on the side is not always legal, but he was still too naive to turn down his offer. In the morning when they stopped at this small diner to eat breakfast, Peping asks Abyong if he can just take the taxi so he can get home right away. He's not the same person anymore.

**EV:** I also appreciate the fact that the torture and killing of the prostitute took place in the basement of the house. Every time Peping walks down the stairs, it's really a descent into darkness; it's as if he is going to hell. Ebert also chided the film for its excessive depiction of violence: they beat the prostitute up, tortured her, took turns raping her, and then chopped her body into small pieces. Do you really think it's necessary to show all that violence?

**BM:** Yes, because that was part of the story. But I don't believe it's excessive. I think their problem was

not the quantity of violence but it in the way I showed it on film, because I wanted it to be as realistic as possible. In fact, during pre-production we watched a lot of gory Hollywood movies because we wanted to study the make-up and how the prosthetics would look like. Anyone can see that Hollywood movies have a lot more violence in them. *The Execution of P* is a children's movie compared to these! But the difference is that no matter how bloody and gory these films might be you tend to be detached because you know that it's just a movie. It may be violent, but it's not realistic.

**EV:** And then there's the production design again, the costume in particular. Here in *The Execution*, Peping is wearing his school T-shirt that says on the back: "Integrity: once lost forever lost." In the course of the film we see him lose not just his innocence but also his integrity. Is that how you see Peping? There's no more redemption for him?

**BM:** Yes, because he's already trapped. There's no way out anymore. That is the consequence of his decision. This may be a way for him to make extra money for his wife and child, but his innocence, his integrity, they're forever lost. Incidentally, that really is the actual shirt that students wear in that school.

**EV:** So you finally won the Best Director award at Cannes for this film. What's more, you're the first Filipino to win that award. How did it feel when they called your name?

**BM:** Everything happened so fast that when I look back now I still couldn't believe it happened. People were clapping their hands, the cameras were clicking; I actually forgot what I wanted to say when I got to the stage.

**EV:** I understand that Quentin Tarantino, who was also a Best Director nominee that year, gave you a fan letter afterwards.

**BM:** Yes, it's there (points to a framed piece of paper hanging on the wall of his office). He just wanted to commend my film. He said he liked it and that he thinks it was brave of me to do the film that way.

**EV:** So after *The Execution of P* your next film was *Grandmother*. What attracted you to tell this kind of story?

**BM:** I first read the script for *Grandmother* around 2007. At that time I couldn't find a producer who would be interested and it even came to a point where I told the writer, Linda Casimiro, that I would just produce it myself. What attracted me to the story is that it explores the flaws in our legal system and, of course, the two main characters are old women, quite rare in films nowadays. There's also the cultural aspect, in that we Filipinos have a certain sentimental attachment to our grandparents. We take care of them when they grow old.

**EV:** I think the most exciting thing with *Grandmother* is that you are able to bring together two of the most respected actresses in the Philippines: Anita Linda, who is like the Grand Old Lady of Philippine cinema, and Rustica Carpio, who is more associated with Philippine theater and literature and at the same time a highly esteemed university professor. So you have two powerhouse actresses with different acting backgrounds. Did you encounter any difficulties bringing them together?

**BM:** Not really. I remember offering the role to Anita Linda as early as 2007. I just wanted to see if she would be interested. She said she's interested but the since it took me some time to find a producer I thought she forgot about it already. So when I finally got the chance to do it two years later, I was really touched when she said that she's been looking forward to doing this. All that time she was waiting for the project to push through. Coco was the one who actually suggested Rustica Carpio when we were doing *Slingshot*. She didn't know who I was and she was surprised with the offer because she's only done a couple of films in the past so she doesn't really see herself as a movie star like Anita.

**EV:** You shot the film in some of the most difficult places like Quiapo and Malabon where the streets are flooded even when there's no rain. You have to ride a *banca* (small wooden boat) in order to get around. Did they have a hard time during the shoot?

**BM:** Not at all. They were surprisingly healthy and strong for their age. The joke at the time was that they are actually aliens. It's like underneath their skin is a 20-year-old woman. They're even healthier than most of my staff even though they are fifty years older than them.

**EV:** Rustica even had to carry this old TV set and walk under the blistering heat.

**BM:** I wanted to remove the picture tube inside the TV because these old TV sets are quite heavy but Rustica refused. She wanted to feel the weight of the TV because she said it would help her with her acting. We shot the scene in a very busy street, with lots of cars passing through. Rustica's face is not really well known so we hid the camera and did 4 or 5 takes because I wanted to see if someone will help her carry the TV set. I was getting worried and I kept asking her if she's okay or if she wanted to stop. But she was fine, she did not complain at all. I guess it's their instinct as actresses. When it's time for the cameras to roll it's like they have this unique ability to tap into this unseen life force that gives them the energy to perform.

**EV:** What about their acting methods? They both come from a very traditional way of acting in the sense that they have to memorize their lines and study their blocking. That's the exact opposite of how you work.

**BM:** I already explained to them my method during pre-production. I told them that this is not a mainstream film where we do histrionics and have close-ups just for the sake of having a close-up. I encourage improvisation and I let them explore their character. If I sense that they are just acting and not being truthful to their character, no matter how good their performance is I tell them that I'm more interested in conveying an emotion in the most natural and truthful way.

When we finished shooting the whole film, Anita came to me and gave me the most touching and most memorable compliment. She said that she found my style liberating. She's been acting for more than fifty years and this was the first time that she felt like a true artist. She finally had a chance to do what she wanted, to really improvise, understand her character and collaborate with the director. I was so touched, especially because it came from someone as respected as her. With Rustica, she came from the theater where every line and every movement had to be precise. But surprisingly, she was able to adjust to my method almost instantly. That, I think, is the mark of a great actress.

**EV:** In your previous films you seldom use close-ups. But for *Grandmother*, the most powerful moments are the close-ups. There's just so much detail in their faces that it's sometimes painful to watch.

**BM:** Because the story calls for it. Their face says so much about the kind of life that they've led, what they've been through. It's like every wrinkle on their face tells a story. I never saw the need for close-ups in my previous films but for this one I really felt that it's necessary.

**EV:** You use close-ups in a different way. Normally in movies, directors do close-ups during dramatic moments when the actor will say something important.

**BM:** Yes. I kind of did the reverse. If you will notice, I used close-ups in moments when there's no dialogue, because their face will say what needs to be said. Like when Anita saw the dead body at the funeral parlour. We didn't need to see who the dead body was. What's important is how Anita reacted. It suddenly reminded her of what she was going through at that moment.

**EV:** The most memorable for me was the restaurant scene. It was really the first time that they had the chance to sit down and talk about the case, but instead they had a lengthy discussion about arthritis first before quickly agreeing to settle the case. I think that's very Filipino. We're not good at being frank and direct; we tend to talk about mundane things first before we get down to business.

**BM:** It made sense to me to do it that way because it's more realistic. These are old women meeting in a crowded place. I can't see it as a confrontation scene where they will spout all these wonderfully written dialogue that audiences can quote afterwards. In a mainstream movie that's probably what they'll do. In the script, Linda Casimiro wrote some memorable lines for that scene. It was really very dramatic. But as we were shooting, I felt that the dialogue was not working. It's good on paper, but somehow there's something lacking when I watch them do the scene together. So I told them to just forget about the script and let's just improvise. All of a sudden, something must have clicked in them because the scene came to life. It was so natural. And that's the one we see in the final version.

**EV:** It's different from mainstream films where writers are asked to verbalize everything just to make sure the audience will get the story. That's why I look at the dialogue in your films as "anti-storytelling" because they don't say what they really feel. But when you stop and think about it, that's how it really is in real life.



**BM:** And sometimes the situation itself is already dramatic so it's better for the actors to not verbalize what they feel. I'm also not fond of histrionic performances where you can sense that the actors are just showing off. I always compare my actors' reaction to how people in real life would react to the same situation. But you have to understand that I don't do these things just to differentiate my films from the mainstream. I just find this approach to be more logical and truthful so as far as I'm concerned I'm not doing anything new or different.

**EV:** Let's talk about your visual approach to this film. Rain seems to be a visual leitmotif since it's raining in almost all the scenes where we see the two grandmothers. It's as if there's this dark cloud that's constantly hanging over them. What was your reason for doing this?

**BM:** Every time I think of a recurring image for my films, I first ask if it's logical. In other words, I don't want to put an image over and over again just for the sake of putting it there and saying to the audience that it's a metaphor for this or that. In the script, it is already mentioned whether it's raining or not or whether the streets are flooded so that was really our visual approach to begin with. But it's also logical because the story takes place during the rainy season. So it is logical but at the same time I wanted to show how weak we are compared to the elements. No matter how important we think our lives may be, it's really nothing when you look at life from a bigger perspective; so that became a metaphor for how our justice system treats the poor and the powerless, especially two old uneducated women. They are mere specs of dust when you look at the bigger picture. They don't matter.

**EV:** The last scene is so powerful even if there's no dialogue. The case has been settled and we see the two grandmothers leave the court house and go their separate ways. As they were about to cross the street, they almost lose their balance when two motorcycle cops escorting a politician inside an over speeding Mercedes Benz zooms past them.

**BM:** Like I said, people like Anita and Rustica's characters don't really matter in the bigger scheme of things.

**EV:** For my final question, I would like to ask you about film distribution. Indie filmmakers get to show their films in festivals abroad and receive all sorts of recognition but we here in the Philippines have very little access to their films. So now there's this growing perception that indie filmmakers are making films purely for the foreign market. You, on the other hand, despite winning in different festivals, made sure that all your films are locally available on video, even though they were never shown commercially in theatres. Do you find it important to make your films accessible to Filipinos?

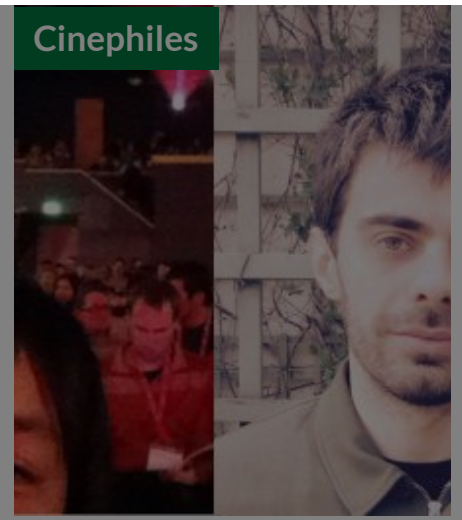
**BM:** Yes, because I believe in sharing my films to my countrymen. I consider myself lucky for having found a local video distributor, but I know a lot of indie filmmakers find it difficult to make their films accessible, especially first-time filmmakers. I'm telling stories about the Filipino condition so it's only right that Filipinos should have access to my films. It's my responsibility as a filmmaker. I don't want to be this snob artist who only makes movies for foreign audiences. I take the extra effort to reach out to the Filipino audience. I'm aware of the fact that most people are not interested in independent films so I take a grassroots approach. I try to show my films in various colleges and universities all over the country and I make it a point to be there as much as possible so I can interact with the students afterwards. It's really very rewarding to hear them say that they appreciate the film. Hearing this from my fellow Filipinos, more than any other audience, is very reassuring and gives me the feeling that I must be doing something right.

*About the Author*

*Elvin Amerigo Valerio teaches film and popular culture at De La Salle University-Manila where he also obtained his MA in Communication. A much longer version of this interview appears in the 2011 Fall/Winter issue of the **Journal of Asian Cinema**.*

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