

An ideal Christmas

Just recently spent a lazy Sunday evening enjoying the classic film *Roman Holiday*. Made in 1953, the movie starred Gregory Peck and introduced Audrey Hepburn, who won an Oscar for this debut and went on to a long and distinguished career. Such fare was the staple of our local movie houses in the heyday of Manila's downtown scene in the 1950s. Our present-day Metro Manila Filmfest held every Christmas season seeks to bring back some of the old sheen, but sadly not in the fabulous Art Deco or '50s-modern film palaces of Escolta, Avenida Rizal, and Claro M. Recto.

The first cinemas at the turn of the century were simple, darkened rooms set up at the back of shops along the Escolta and some of the other shopping streets in Santa Cruz. Short films, mostly from Europe, were also often featured together with *bodabil* acts in established theaters in Manila, such as the Manila Grand Opera House.

The 1910s saw the first purpose-built cinemas like the Ideal Theater on Avenida Rizal. The theater opened right before Christmas of that year. It was a joint venture of the Roces, Teotico, Basa, Tuazon, and Guidote families. They chose the name Ideal because it meant the same in Spanish and English. In the first three decades of the 20th century, newspapers, magazines, and eventually radio, were still bilingual. The theater was originally a wooden accessoria-like structure but its success quickly led to a concrete structure that seated 400. Admission price just before the war was 20 centavos for the orchestra and 40 centavos for the balcony.

I cannot trace the original designer but with the advent of longer feature films from Hollywood, the owners brought in pioneer architect Juan Arellano to renovate the theater. It was known as the Old Ideal

because in the 1930s, as ownership was consolidated under the Roces family, the theater was rebuilt with a new design by the young and talented architect Pablo Antonio, Sr.

Antonio was one of a handful of second-generation Filipino architects who had studied or trained abroad and came back to introduce a new architectural style identified with the glory years of American movie theaters—the Art Deco style. The streamlined geometry, Flash Gordon rocket-ship curves, and abstracted ornamentation defined the product of a new movement that sought to replace the Neo-classical architecture prevalent then with a more modern style.

The New Ideal was actually the second theater that Antonio designed. The first was the Lyric Theater on Escolta. This premier shopping street of pre-war Manila saw another Art Deco masterpiece, the Capitol Theater, designed by Antonio's contemporary Juan Napkil in the 1930s. The Ideal flourished in this peacetime era and continued to prosper after the war. It showed mostly MGM productions and celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1960 with the showing of William Wyler's *Ben Hur*. Wyler also directed the earlier *Roman Holiday*.

More Art Deco theaters appeared as downtown Manila became the Great White Way of Asia. The

Times Theater on the newly widened Quezon Avenue opened in 1941 just before the onset of the war. These movie houses brought the magic and glitz of Hollywood to Manila. The Ideal, Lyric, and Times also introduced another innovation—neon signs. The neon lights of America's Broadway were imported and saw use as illuminated marvels on Manila's growing downtown district. The lights and the magical entertainment of movies brought people from the provinces. Eventually, all major towns and cities in the Philippines built their own neon-embossed Art Deco theaters.

After the war, some of the first structures to be repaired or rebuilt were the movie houses. Quezon Avenue, Rizal Avenue, and Claro M. Recto became the movie-house district with theaters like the Galaxy, State, and Avenue adding to the older ones. It was the golden age, too, for Filipino movies and the movie star system. The LVN and Sampaguita studios produced dozens of films a year, making the Philippines rank next to India and the US at one time in total production.

The Sixties was the last decade that these theaters ruled as mass entertainment. The workhorse Ideal could bring in the crowds till then. It had, by the

swinging '60s, been expanded to 1,500 seats. In the Seventies, however, suburban cinemas like the gigantic New Frontier Cinema in Cubao and the Rizal in Makati attracted moviegoers with less crowded and polluted surroundings, more parking, and a newfangled amenity called the mall.

The last two decades of the 20th century saw the demise of the downtown movie house. The Filipino movie industry, except for independent films, has slowed to a trickle, replaced by the less-than-delightful fare on television. Hollywood still rules in the 21st century in cineplexes. The 4, 6, 8, 10 or more clusters of mini-theaters now form just an element in the ubiquitous big-box complexes that have replaced our downtowns, markets, and public plazas.

Cinemas today carry the name of the mall or shopping center that house them. Few have individual names. Developers tend to just designate them by number, letters or colors; thus conferring them with as much character as the levels of parking facilities. They have ceased to be the venues, too, for the display of the creative talent of our architects.

The loss of the old Art Deco and post-war movie houses has also spelled the loss of a vibrant type of urbanism. Downtowns and street life have become internalized and so-called urban life commodified in quasi-public spaces. Here, the public is controlled by advertising, retail, and fast food daily, force-feeding millions instead of nourishing any real sense of community, cultural enrichment or citizenship.

But this may be too much to ask from the buildings we build or the movies we make. Or is it? Let's leave it at that and let me end with some advice: Please take care when you do your last-minute shopping. Pickpockets and bag snatchers stalk the shopping malls and bazaars, so watch out. But better put—there are also bigger thieves and scoundrels lurking in the shadows. They are hoping the holidays mask the scandals of the past year and the even more heinous plots for the new year. (*Philstar.com*)

CITY SENSE

Paulo Alcazaren

YOUNGBLOOD

Joyce Raboca

One broken family

JOSE Rizal wrote a chapter in *El Filibusterismo* ironically titled *Maligayang Pasko* (Merry Christmas). Basically, it narrates the fate of the Family De Dios, who had something other than a merry Christmas. The daughter, Juli, became a maid; the grandfather, *Tata Selo*, went mute; and the father, *Tales*, was kidnapped by rebels. All this while the Spanish priests went merrymaking over the ill fortune of this family.

While I do love this lesson in Filipino, I can't help but feel sadness, even bitter resentment, over how our fate has never really changed from that time. We Filipinos are still a broken family, especially this Christmas.

Before I continue, let me first give a Merry Christmas greeting to every uncorrupted politician, tooth fairy, reindeer, principled Philippine president, and elf out there. As a teenager in her senior year in high school, I have definitely felt the Christmas spirit from such characters.

As I was scanning the news with my dad the other day, I read about an "uncorrupted politician" whose

case was dismissed because he was not put on trial early enough. They used this fancy label for it too: "clear transgression of the constitutional rights of the accused."

I was a little confused and asked my lawyer father to explain it to me. I had to digest his answer for a while and, being naïve, I had to ask for some clarification. "So the court said that because the trial took too long to process, he can go free?" asked my father. "Does that mean all the thousands of cases that have been sitting around with the Sandiganbayan for more than five years are being dismissed as well?"

Apparently not. Just when I thought it was never too late for justice to be served (especially in the Philippines, where the justice system is always 10 years too late), connections once again overpowered justice. But the wrongly accused and impatient defendants have to be friends with the ombudsman first, I believe.

So thanks to the uncorrupted politician, I have finally realized what Christmas is all about.

The tooth fairy has also decided to visit and spread the Christmas spirit in the form of plundered money. Hooray for those who put morality under their pillow! In recent weeks, another former top

official decided that lying, stealing and making a run for it should merit him freedom and a gift. Perhaps he wants his teeth back? But teeth cannot be grown back once you've put them under your pillow, and toothless is the man whose honesty has been bought by hundreds of millions of pesos from the tooth fairy. I will definitely bear that in mind this season. Maybe the tooth fairy will come and leave me a few billion pesos in exchange for my honesty as well.

Our painfully principled President has decided to steal Santa's reindeer this year and ride him across the country. I believe his name is Cha-cha. Although she says that the reindeer is bringing Santa's big bag of solutions to the country's problems, I now have doubts that Cha-cha the reindeer ever belonged to Santa. After all, the song never mentions a reindeer named Cha-cha. Hmm ... that seems a little bit suspicious. I just hope she won't be riding that reindeer in 2010. That would be a heavier weight on all of us (and not just on Cha-cha) come next Christmas.

As for my own life, college is around the corner, and I'm waiting for Santa's elf to come ask me what I want for Christmas. Other than a box of transparent candies to send to the government, I would like to get into the top two colleges to which I applied

for admission. January 2009 is acceptance month and I am hoping at least that Christmas stays bearable—maybe even enjoyable—until the results of the exams come out.

And when those results come out, I hope I won't come down with a case of "senioritis," a sickness common to high school seniors after being accepted to a college. The symptoms include laziness around, slacking off, and developing grade apathy. That would not be a good thing, especially since our parents are Santas (shh, don't tell them I know).

As for all of you, be happy with the shallow merrymaking for now, because we Filipinos are not going to find merriment in having Spanish priests running the country this Christmas. Maybe next year we won't lose our voice amid the injustices, like *Tata Selo* in *El Filibusterismo*. Like *Juli* and *Tales*, maybe next year we will be free from injustice and the craziness of our politics. Maybe next Christmas, the reindeer, the elf, and the tooth fairy will bring nationalism, honesty and justice back to our country.

In the meantime, Merry Christmas! (*Inquirer.net*)

Joyce Raboca, 17, is a senior high school student at Assumption College.

In good and bad times, let us remember to help and share

THE latest survey of the Social Weather Station released early this month showed that the living conditions of Filipino families have improved, based on the decreased rate of self-assessed poverty from 59 percent in June to 52 percent in September.

We are happy to note that there is a close monitoring of the poverty and hunger problem. These kinds of reports on the efforts from advocates and various sectors actually help spread awareness from the public in general. But we are worried that more and more contract workers abroad have lost their jobs as a result of the global financial crisis that has spread from USA and Europe to the Asian region. Before this, the Philippines was listed as one of the 33 countries with a serious hunger problem along with troubled economies such as Myanmar, Timor Leste, and others located in Africa. Latest data from the National Statistical Coordination

Board from mid-year reports brings the alarming news that more than 11 million Filipinos, or about 12 percent of the population are food-poor and live below the subsistence level and that hunger is prevalent in the southern part of the country. Furthermore, 18 percent of our population is considered undernourished. A survey report released by the Social Weather Station (SWS) about four months ago showed that some 3.3 million families experienced not having anything to eat during that period. We certainly want to know if this figure has already improved.

One concrete solution that the government has undertaken to directly provide a solution to this problem is a program called Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino (PPP). Under the program, a household-beneficiary can receive as much as P1,400 for a maximum of three children that includes P500 per month for nutrition and health expenses and P300 per month per child, for a maximum of three children per household for educational expenses. The program is similar to the conditional cash transfer (CCT) program mentioned by this columnist in previous articles, which became popular in Latin America and other poor countries as a poverty re-

duction measure due to its direct positive impact and the way that it provides immediate relief to the needy. We have also mentioned that the program is a key factor behind the socio-economic transformation of a once-poor Brazil, where 11 million families were enrolled in the program. We are positive that the same measure adopted by our government for a total of 320,000 initial families can produce positive and real results towards the improvement of the living conditions of all the poor households in our country, especially if it is replicated for the other identified poor families in different provinces. In the same token, the program enables poor households to cope with poverty; at the same time allows them to maintain household assets from which they earn their living; and to help them nourish and educate their children despite poverty. The program ensures this by strictly requiring children of beneficiary-families to attend school at least 85 percent of the time, receive vaccinations and health care. This is a good program if only all the resources allocated will be accounted for and utilized well.

Another thing that warms my heart is the volunteerism of business executives like Ayala's Jaime

Augusto Zobel de Ayala and Alaska's Wilfred Steven Uytensgu who early this week, spearheaded a fundraising event for "Children's Hour," a benefit lunch to help poor children. If all CEOs and presidents of big companies in the country would share their time and talents to generate funds to uplift the conditions of the poor families in the country and help mitigate poverty, then surely a big mark would be made, giving life to what is called "corporate social responsibility."

Now that it's Christmas season, let me exhort all individuals, groups and agencies to exert extra effort in reaching out to the needy families around them. The government should not allow any family's table to be without food or simple meal. We are a nation rich with natural resources and so much land to till. Government only has to take a serious lead and allocate the available resources well. If only everyone will do their share, we will all together make a difference. Let us put to reality the ending phrase of a famous Tagalog Christmas carol *Ang Pasko ay Sumapit*, which goes (in English), "...and from now on, even if it's not Christmas, let us give to one another!" (*Philstar.com*)

Conflict in foreign policy bringing our troops home

SEVERAL religious leaders in Iraq could hardly wait for the withdrawal of American Troops in Iraq. The year 2011 or 2012 is too long for them, and as much as possible, the current agreement being worked into by Iraq and the United States would be inconsistent with the avowed plan of President Obama and Senator Hillary Clinton—to pull our troops as soon as possible.

Why does the current President or his political advisers insist on retaining the troops in Iraq until 2011 or 2012 when the troops seem to be unwanted? Is this to our national interest? Is it our national interest to stay longer when they finally found out that there were no weapons of mass destruction?

Did they not learn a lesson from the American people when they voted majority of the Democrats in protest against the policies of President Bush?

And what would be the effect of such agreements when President Obama and his policy makers decide to have our troops come home as they are bent to and had stated time and time again? It does not seem really that President Bush is listening to the voice of the American people at all.

Ask every mother who has a son or daughter in Iraq if she wants his son or daughter in Iraq longer and her answer would certainly be positive. Because prolonging the troops stay would mean more lives lost, and, also, more expenses on the part of our government.

It is about time President Bush and his policy makers acknowledge new options, and should now give way to the plans and policies of the new administration.

President Obama had said, we better concentrate more on the capture or elimination of bin Laden. We should send more troops to Pakistan and or to Afghanistan to hunt bin Laden.

President Safari of Pakistan has signified his intention to cooperate with the United States and will help to capture terrorist in his own land.

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Recently *the Post* published an article stating that the Dream Act giving legal status to college age illegal aliens might pass next year.

What we want to know is—when will Congress consider the Dreams of legal immigrants?

What about the Dreams of the millions of legal immigrants made to wait up to 22 years overseas by the US Government before they are allowed into the USA? Every year, thousands of them die before their Dream of becoming a US resident are realized. The long waiting times also causes legal immigrant children in the queue overseas to lose the opportunity for an education in America; an opportunity that the Dream Act unfairly would bestow only on the children of illegal aliens. When will Congress work to grant legal immigrant children their Dreams before they age-out or their parents die?

What about the Dreams of the many thousands of English speaking orphans overseas, who Dream of living in the USA and becoming an American? When will Congress consider their Dreams?

What about the Dreams of the many thousands of foreign students with IQ's of 150 or higher who graduate from High School every year? Their Dream is to go to the best Universities in the World which are here in the USA, but they cannot afford to pay the out of country tuition rate. What of their Dreams?

What about the Dream of President John F. Kennedy, who opposed an immigration system that "discriminates among applicants for admission to the United States on the basis of accident of birth"? Yet this is exactly what the Dream Act does, it discriminates on the basis of accident of birth. The majority of the Dream Act receipts are in the USA due to their being born in Mexico and Latin America, whose close proximity makes it much easier for them to illegally enter.

When will Congress consider the Dreams of legal immigrants, and those not only in the USA but around the world who want an equal opportunity immigration system?

What of their Dreams?



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