

## NORA AUNOR: A TECHNICOLOR HISTORY\*

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### *Abstract*

*The essay situates the life of and the mass-mediated folklore woven around Nora Aunor, the most accomplished transmedia performer the Philippine entertainment industry has produced, in the context of women's labor. The latter is inscribed in the political economy of performance in cinema that dramatizes a particular material condition Aunor and her audience embody. Aunor's biography, therefore, serves as a narrative of work that invests emotion and role playing in the production of a consumable and consuming passion of "acting" and "action."*

*Makulay na Daigdig* reminds us of Nora Aunor's long-running television program in the 70s which revealed the many faces of the actress and the social characters she portrayed in the weekly drama anthology. The title, moreover, takes us to Nora's own local moral world in full color, woven by subjectivities and discourses which render it deep and painful and lasting. Nora Aunor is probably the most accomplished transmedia star the Philippines has ever produced, spanning a career of four decades and counting.

*Makulay na Daigdig*, finally, leads us to the path of suffering, the theoretical anchor of this project which seeks to reflect on the reception of a life of a star as a collective sharing, through a range of identificatory practices, by "intimates"

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of the burden of belonging to a common but contested condition. Such condition is marked by critical shifts and transformations, from abjection to ascension, from solidarity to estrangement, from prosperity to regret. Indeed, *makulay* does not simply describe *daigdig*; it imbues the universe of agency and constraint with the possibility of struggle, of drama, of the performance of perseverance and change in lives.

In March 2000, Nora, known to be a very close friend of and ardent campaigner for President Joseph Estrada, figured in a government-contract anomaly involving a questionable bid for firetrucks in which her name appeared as one of the “sponsors” representing the awardee. Too depressed to comment, she “spoke” through her manager who defended Nora by invoking her class history, which, according to the latter’s logic, should restrain her from making money on the sly and aggrandizing herself at the expense of other people. According to her spokesperson: “I know Nora that well. She won’t be involved in any scam like that even if she doesn’t have money. *Galing siya sa mahirap. Hindi siya natatakot magbalik sa kahirapan.*” Nora “speaks” here through her mythology as Cinderella who, in spite of privilege and access to power, would brook no breach in her identificatory imaginary with the dispossessed, which invest her *makulay na daigdig* with dignity and honor.

*“Ang batang pinaglihi sa Birhen Dolorosa ay pinangalanang Nora Villamayor.”*

—Rustom Quinto

But how does one tell Nora Aunor’s story as contemporary folklore? Surely, there are many ways through the discourse of music, the cinema, and even the lives of fans whose

own stories embody Nora's. And we may present biographical readings of Nora and the main themes that mark certain turns in history as well as embody the sentiments which motor the Cinderella folklore contrived on her behalf. We also discuss how Nora is appreciated by critics as star and actress in relation to the power she holds and disposes as Philippine cinema's Nora Sinderella. In other words, here are Nora's stories through the idiom of the biography and narratives of sufferance.

### **Nora's Story**

The folklore of Nora Aunor as Cinderella emerges from various sources. This study focuses on a paperback biography, *Ang True Story ni Guy*, written in the early 80s by Baby K. Jimenez, a movie writer who used to be the subject's confidant but got estranged from her upon Baby's emigration to the United States. The two-volume biography begins with prefatory pages that frame Nora's mythology of conquest. The setting is Cannes in the south of France, site of the famed Film Festival which attracts not only the world's best films and their makers, but also the stars of the day. Nora's film *Bona* (1980), directed by the late Lino Brocka, was invited to the non-competition section of the annual film event.

Baby pictures Nora as wandering into this fantasyland wide-eyed though not wide-awake. She conjures a dreamlike state that the Philippine superstar almost trespasses, but also deserves. She portrays Nora as a "lost little girl" and a "little brown girl" finding herself promenading along open-air cafes and in new clothes bought at a boutique in town. There is in this recollection a deep sense of disbelief for Nora: "Ngayon, parang nilalakad natin ang isang postcard." It seems that the present condition is not real, and that it is her presence that renders it illusory.

Baby might as well have been asking: "Who would have thought that someone like Nora would make it here?" And the actress is made to appear as sharing in this overinvestment of lack and a repression of complicity in the business of movies and, concomitantly, dream making, which is undeniably mass-mediated worldwide. Nora is quoted as saying: "Parang panaginip, ano?"

This trope of disbelief is carved into higher relief when Baby intimates that the dream is determinate, that it is limited by an awakening. This bursting of the bubble, as it were, comes at that point when she asks: "Is the Noramania dying down?" This book came at a time when Nora's career was on the wane and many quarters would pronounce her down and out. It is, therefore, very interesting how the biographer saves the mythology by painting a certain "Nora Cinderella" fairy tale that according to her accords the subject with inimitability, mainly because the subject's story is "not yet over" and that she is *sui generis*: "*Isa lamang ang Nora.*" Indeed, a Cinderella tropology postures to arrest the progression of failure, sustained as it is by, again, the aesthetic of disbelief which soon transforms into a triumphalist device of transcendence. We discern this when Baby herself reinscribes disbelief into her encounter with Nora as she remembers the star's early years in the scene: "*Si Nora, artista? Sumikat kaya ang batang ito? Ang artista, para sa amin, ay katulad nina Gloria Romero at Nida Blanca, Susan Roces at Amalia Fuentes . . . Ano nga ba ang ginagawa ni Nora sa Sampaguita, na bakuran ng matatangkad at balat-sibuyas na mga aktres?*" And to sort of answer herself, she evokes the legendary voice of Nora: "She can sing."

It is the voice and the singing that carry the biography through, pegging its premise on the rhetoric of conquest, the conquest of deprivation. The first passages of Baby's narra-

tive take the reader to the depths of Nora's poverty, her "lost childhood," and even her fear of the dark which can be traced to the family's having only gaslight in their humble hut; they would only avail of electricity when Nora finally joined show business. This serves as Baby's cue to reprise the commonplace knowledge of Nora's origins as waterseller in Iriga; she quotes the star's memory of labor and courage: "*Pinakamadali ang magtinda ng tubig. Wala kasing kapital. Naghahanap lang kami ng mga boteng gamit na. Nililinis iyon at pinupuno ng tubig sa poso. Minsan, pag dalawa lang ang karga ko, iniipit ko sa braso ko. Pag lima, inilalagay ko sa isang basket. Tigsisingko ang maliliit. Pag malaki, diyes. Masaya na ako pag umabot ng beinte ang kita ko. Buung-buo ko 'yung ineentrega kay Mamay. Pantawid gutom rin.*" Light, water, food: basic needs denied to Nora.

In 1983, Roces Publications wanted the one closest to Nora to write a biography of the Superstar. They went to Baby who claims, till today, that she knows Nora "inside out." Jimenez, now residing in Los Angeles and occasionally visits friends and family in the Philippines, was Nora's friend, publicist, and aide from the seventies to the early eighties. Baby last saw Nora in 1996 and tells us in an interview that Nora "has not changed." Probed deeper of this state of unchangingness, Baby speaks of a certain "nature" of Nora. We are inclined to construe this not really as "essence," but as "naturaleza," a particular predisposition of practice which is contingent on performance and situation.

At the backcover of the two-volume biography is a blurb describing Baby as someone who knows Nora "from head to foot. *Ika nga, kahit pagbali-baligtarin si Nora, inside out, kilalang-kilala pa rin siya ni Baby K. Halos magkasama at magkasabay silang lumaki sa showbiz.*" And Baby's ties with Nora are not confined to professional dealings; they go a

great deal deeper: *Dinamayan niya si Guy sa hirap at ginhawa. Sa tuwing nararamdaman ni Guy na may darating na problema sa buhay at career niya, lalo na sa pag-ibig, si Ate Babes ang una niyang tinatakbuhan.*"

As she reflects on the biography she has written, Baby inevitably talks about Nora's endearing and enervating attributes. She starts off by dispelling the idea that Nora, because of her origins and reputation, is putty in the hands of shrewd operators in the entertainment industry. Baby reveals that Nora is "smart," and that she cannot be outwitted. She recounts an incident in Manhattan in which an aide handed Nora a bagful of money. On receiving it, without counting the contents, Nora tells the aide that something is missing. "*Kulang ito,*" Nora chides the aide, who eventually relents and owns up to filching a little for a pack of cigarette. We had always thought that Nora is too trusting and too naive. But Baby cautions us and properly frames this trusting attitude as a kind of toleration which has its limits.

Baby, moreover, links this up with a stable description of Nora: that is, her being "current," her capacity to move on and not to look back, performing new "drama" before a different set of captive audience. This is why her inner circle changes by the seasons. "*Nagdaan ka lang sa buhay niya,*" according to Baby. It seems to be like this: Even if you go an extra mile for her and offer her passionate loyalty, Nora will not keep your company forever, but you, quite paradoxically, will lastingly cherish the memory that you had been once part of her life.

Baby gropes for words to describe this seemingly indescribable feeling of allegiance, admiration, and adulation, and can only resort to the phrase: "*Iba talaga.*" This expression of difference fluctuates in the calculus of charisma, with the person charmed not being able to pin down a determinate

mode of affection for her. Baby reasons that in spite of Nora's transgressions against this affection, fans are still around to suffer the infliction and, consequently, the affliction. "*Ilang beses na yan sila nasaktan, na-indyan, pero nandyan pa rin sila.*" They know Nora and they want her the way she is as they constantly negotiate with her to meet her obligations to them. And to some extent, Baby notes, Nora does perform the duties required of her, by playing certain roles in the midst of her audience.

Nora, according to Baby, is amusing, never runs out of tricks and stories, unpredictable, playful, and can actually harness this performative prowess to win people, to ask for their forgiveness and forbearance. Baby recalls her first meeting with Nora. The latter does not show up for an interview appointment scheduled three times, and when she finally does, Baby confronts her that no one has stood her up yet, whereon Nora would cry in lavish contrition. "*Kaya niyang paglaruan ang emosyon mo.*" And it seems this play keeps the ties between Nora and her following alive. There had been times when Nora would be extricated from crowds and Baby would hide her in ambulances and firetrucks and even cover her with newspaper. Baby would try to waylay the mob, an act to be spoiled by Nora who would suddenly pop up and tell everyone where she really is. The hiding and the seeking persists. Still, however, Nora, even if she is a "*barkadera*" and "*lukaret,*" has a deep inferiority complex.

This intersection of conflicting predispositions makes Nora vulnerable to peril, and therefore to affinity with the legions who are exposed to the same danger. This is why "*madali siyang mahalín,*" not because her fans are blind, "*bulag*" in Baby's reckoning, but because "love" demands reciprocation of weakness and understanding. "There is no one and nothing like Nora."

This relationship premised on reciprocation motors the power of Nora's mythology. When I ask Baby to explain this, she gives several reasons:

1. The triumph in breaking the traditional mold of the moviestar, and the ensuing massive following. "*Patayuin mo lang si Nora sa Luneta at pagbasahin mo ng telephone directory, dudumugin.*" Shown a picture of phenomenal crowds, Baby confidently declares it was a typical scene at the height of Nora's stardom.
2. Music which Baby believes is the "language of the heart."
3. Accessibility which allowed Nora to let her fans into her inner sanctum and private and personal sphere. According to Baby, fans could sleep in her bedroom beside her. She was very public and broke down barriers between star and her mass. "*Puwede mo siyang hipuin at sabihin na tao pala.* You can experience Nora." Even details of everydayness matter to shatter any form of abstraction or mystification of Nora. Baby avers: "*Kapag maghihimalamos si Nora, aalamin nila kung anong sabon ang ginamit.*" Baby also remembers the night when Nora climbed over her fence to get inside her house; in the morning, she found Nora in the sofa, ready to pour out her problems. The biography confirms this insight by recounting the following incident:

Mamay suggested *na kahit na tulog pa si Guy*, she'd allow the fans to form a single file *at isa-isang sisilip sa kuwarta* to take a peek at Guy.

*"Naawa ako sa kanila, malalayo pa ang pinangalangan."*

*Nanood kami sa eksena. Kinilabutan kami nang husto.* One by one they came in. They would touch the sleep-



ing Cinderella lightly, *na parang isang santa*, wipe her face with their hankies, make a quick exit *habang hinahalikan ang panyong naidampi kay Guy*. (Jimenez V. 1 1983: 124)

This mode of accessibility nourishes Nora's vulnerability, which is dangerously and generously shown in the star's widening girth, wrinkles, aging skin, and the ravages of time's consumption of flesh. As Baby intimates:

*Siya rin 'yung artistang hindi marunong magpa-make up at maghanda ng damit for pictorial sessions. Kesehodang kapapaligo lamang at kalalabas sa banyo or bagong gising o kumakain sa isang sulok ng set, the cameras never stopped flashing.* (Jimenez 1983 V. 1: 48)

When the biography came out, it sold like hotcakes. Baby reveals that every week, she would receive five sacks of letters, with money inside to defray costs of additional autographed copies. In all her years with Nora, Baby feels she has learned through her, and when she saw her the last time and Nora again performed, she knew better because she knows her. That she, too, must perform, renews her relations with Nora after all this time of estrangement and accountability. After all, according to Baby, the biography is a mere tenth of Nora's life.

Baby's Taglish biography is written in an easygoing and anecdotal style, with the author situating herself in the thick of the unfolding of Nora's life. The first volume is devoted to what Baby calls the "Tirso Cruz III era" and the second to the years succeeding that period. The biography mainly zeroes in on Nora's childhood in Iriga, love affairs, movies, family relations, controversies; and reads like entertainment journalism written by an intimate. Baby even quotes Nora talking to her and calling her by the endearment Bok or Ate Babes.

This is actually not the only biography of Nora. Rustom Quinto's *Nora Aunor Superstar* is, in fact, a more detailed narration of Nora's life in Filipino. We glean a serious tone in Quinto's project through his opening paragraph:

*Isang impit na uha ang narinig buhat sa isang tahanang dahop sa Baryo San Francisco, Iriga, Camarines Norte (this is a mistake; it is Sur). Isang sanggol na babae na kulang sa timbang ang iniluwal ni Antonia Cabaltera, maybahay ng isang kargador sa perokaril na si Eustaquio Villamayor. Isang matandang hilot na nagnangalang Agapito Layusa at ang lola ng sanggol na si Impong Teresa Magistrado ang naging saksi sa pagsilang na iyon ng isang nakatak dang gumawa ng pangalan sa kasaysayan ng pelikulang Pilipino. (Quinto, 21)*

Moreover, his chapter headings seem to indicate that his account is dense with details and intimacy:

Nora Aunor, Superstar  
 Isinilang ang Isang Nakatak dang Maging Bituin  
 Si Negrang Bulilit  
 Kabiguan sa Unang Pagtatangka  
 Apat na Beses Tinanggihan sa Pelikula  
 Naging Phenomenal Star si Nora  
 Nagulo ang Buhay sa Pagsikat  
 Ang Dakilang Pagtakas  
 Muling Pangingibang Bansa  
 Patuloy ang Pagningning ng Bituin  
 Awit ng Tagumpay  
 Nora Aunor, Top Movie Maker  
 Nora Aunor, Trendsetter  
 Ang Lumalaganap na Nora-Mania  
 Ang mga Noranians, Lakas ng Superstar  
 Si Nora at Tirso  
 Hinanakit ni Nora kay Tirso  
 Si Nora at Edgar

Si Nora at Cocoy  
Si Nora at Manny  
Si Nora at Sajid  
Si Nora at Ricky  
Si Nora at Ed  
Si Nora at sina Imelda, Jovy, at Doy  
Si Nora at Mayor Amoranto  
Ayaw na Matawag na Superstar  
Trahedya sa ika-19 na Kaarawan  
Mga Problema ni Nora  
Si Nora at ang May-Akda.

There is also a strong possibility that Baby based her biography on this text. But it is Baby's project that is in more active circulation and follows through on Nora's career after reaching its summit. Quinto's book can be classified as rare.

At the outset, before discussing the biography, I wish to sketch out Nora's life as revealed in Baby's narrative, which is then updated using various sources to round out Nora's continuing history.

### **Biography**

1953. Nora Cabaltera Villamayor was born on May 21, 1953 in Barrio San Francisco, Iriga in Camarines Sur, Bicol Peninsula to parents Eustaquio Villamayor (Papay Tayoy) and Antonia Cabaltera (Mamay Tunying). She was the seventh child of ten, half of whom died. Nora has a half-brother by his father.

1958. Nora was five years old when she sold water and foodstuff at the Iriga railroad station to help her family survive.

1960. Nora first studied at the Mabini Memorial Colleges. Because of poverty, she went to school unshod. She only

had one set of school uniforms. Apart from this deprivation, she was teased for her dark complexion and crooked teeth.

1961. Nora's Kuya Erning was sent to Nichols in Pasay City for work. Nora stayed with him while waiting for classes to open in Iriga. She lived with the sister of her mother, Mamay Belen, and decided to continue her studies here. She met her Lola Teresa, her first teacher in singing. Lola Teresa had a musical family: her eldest daughter, Manay Cirila, was a zarzuela performer and played bass. Nora's own mother played the banjo, and Mamay Belen the guitar.

1964. Nora returned to Bicol and continued her studies at the Iriga Central Elementary School, then went back to Mabini Memorial Colleges to finish Grade 6. She started to join amateur singing contests. On her first attempt in school, she lost. She tried her luck at the Liberty Big Show and Darigold Jamboree contests and won. Nora was beginning to be noticed in her hometown.

1965-1966. Nora went back to Nichols and studied at Centro Escolar University in Parañaque. She was 12 years old and in first year high school. She joined Tawag ng Tanghalan. Mamay Belen taught her correct diction, interpretation, and expression. In between lessons, she would hie off to MBC ABS-CBN to see her favorite moviestars: Susan Roces and Eddie Gutierrez in their program *Maganda Kong Kapitbahay*. Nora failed her first audition; but on her second, she made it. She was named the singer of the week of Tawag ng Tanghalan, with the song "You and the Night and the Music," but was later defeated by Jose Yap, the reigning champion. She then joined the *Darigold Bulilit Contest* of Leila Benitez and reigned for 14 weeks. She also appeared in the *Tita Betty's Children Show* and in stage shows in the provinces.

1967. Nora rejoined Tawag ng Tanghalan, this time as Nora Aunor, which is the surname of the husband of Mamay

Belen. She won and defeated the reigning champion. She held the title for 14 weeks. Representing Central Luzon, she gained a slot at the Grand Finals, for which she chose “Moonlight Becomes You” as her competition song; she was named the Pinakamahusay na Tuklas na Talino ng 1967 (Best Talent Discovery) on May 29. The biography reveals that three important people saw Nora win that night: director and producer Artemio Marquez, film mogul Azucena Vera-Perez, and actor Fernando Poe, Jr. Because of this triumph, Nora was invited to Timi Yuro’s concert. The American star took an interest in her and offered Nora to go with her to the States. Nora’s parents and Mamay Belen did not approve. In this episode, Mamay Belen processed papers of guardianship, just to fend off Yuro’s importuning. But Nora’s biological mother, Mamay Tunying, felt slighted as this gesture somehow laid claim to Nora. Much of this was about money. A promoter, Charles Mather, approached the Aunors with a \$1,500 offer for Nora’s every performance in the U.S. The rift between the Villamayors and Aunors soon got settled. Carmen Soriano, a big star of the period, introduced Nora to Buddy de Vera, the producer of Alpha Records. This company gave her the first break in recording. Her first recorded song, “Moonlight Becomes You,” flopped, but her third, “The Music Played,” did well. In her guestings at radio shows, she met film comedian German Moreno, who brought her to Sampaguita Pictures. Nora signed a contract with the studio. Nora was introduced in the film *All over the World* for Sampaguita and made five more movies in the year. She was paid PhP200,000.00 per project.

1969. Nora received offers from other film outfits. JBC Productions paired her off with Tirso Cruz III, fondly called Pip. Nora assumed the nickname Guy, thus the Guy and Pip loveteam. Film director Artemio Marquez asked Nora to star

in his films financed by Tower Productions. These projects, though hastily done and with minimum of artistic considerations, were howling hits. Noramania took to flight. Nora rented a house in Cubao and gathered her family in Manila, except for her father who stayed in Iriga.

1970. Nora was busy more than ever, making eighteen movies. She accepted offers from other producers and would be sued by Sampaguita Pictures for breach of contract; Senator Jovito Salonga stood as lawyer for Civil Case 14657. Because of hectic schedules, she began missing appointments and shoots. Still, Nora made movies. She bought houses in subdivisions in Parañaque and Quezon City. As teen star Nora would be teamed up with Rico Lopez, Cocoy Laurel, Manny de Leon, Edgar Mortiz, among others.

1971. Nora returned to Sampaguita Pictures. She celebrated her debut, an event which was swamped by guests and fans, but her parents were nowhere to be found. Tower Productions haled her into court. She signed a contract with RPN Channel 9 for two weekly shows, *Superstar*, a musical variety show and *Nora Cinderella*, a drama show. This was also the year she went back to Bicol for two film assignments and attended the blessing/house warming of her house as part of the newly acquired 52-hectare hacienda in Iriga. Awit Awards proclaimed her the Best Female Recording Artist of 1971.

1972. NV Productions was established with its initial offering titled *Carmela*, directed by Danny Holmsen and released the year after. Co-starring with Nora were Jay Ilagan and Rico Lopez. She won her first acting award at the Quezon City Film Festival for *And God Smiled at Me* (1972).

1973. Charlotte Jennifer popularly known as Lot-Lot came into Nora's life as her first adopted daughter.

1974. While taping an episode for *Makulay na Daigdig ni Nora*, her drama anthology series on television, directed

by Lupita Aquino Concio, she met Christopher “Boyet” de Leon, fresh from his successful film debut, *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* (1974), directed by Lino Brocka; he was also taping for his sister Pinky de Leon’s show on KBS Channel 9. After that meeting, Christopher guested on *Superstar* and Nora in turn watched his stage play, *Godspell*. Months later, Christopher was signed up to be one of the lead actors of *Banaue* (1975), a film by Gerardo de Leon shot in Baguio City and produced by Nora. Many observers believed that their attraction to each other was magnet-like. Nora’s relationship with Christopher blossomed on and off camera. Despite the fact that Nora was having difficulty in managing her own NV Productions, the Nora Aunor-Chrisopher de Leon (Guy and Boyet) love team dominated the scene.

1975. Nora married Christopher de Leon in a civil ceremony in Pasay City. Nora was making films under NV Productions and scored one hit after another. In December, Kristoffer Ian was born. Ian was the couple’s first-born. Nora was given a surprise gift by Christopher, a fully furnished house in a Marikina subdivision.

1976. The famous “kasalan-sa-tubig,” the first of its kind among couples in the industry in the country, took place in Bacquet Sur with the de Leon and Villamayor families, close relatives, friends and associates in attendance. This was a validation of Nora’s and Christopher’s union officiated by a Catholic priest. CDL Records label was set-up. Christopher cut and released a few singles. The couple hired the services of 15 to 20 writers as their PROs (official public relations officers). Eventually the family transferred residence to Valencia in Quezon City.

1977. In the Metro Manila Film Festival (MMFF) Awards Night, Nora, with her film entry, *Minsa’y Isang Gamu-Gamo*

(1976), lost to Hilda Koronel for the film, *Insiang* (1976) in the Best Actress race while Christopher, her husband, won the Best Actor award for the film *Ganito Kami Noon, Paano Kayo Ngayon?* The marriage was on the rocks. NV Production for Television was established, serving as co-producer with KBS Channel 9 for *Makulay na Daigdig ni Nora*. In the first Urian Awards given by the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino, Nora received her first major acting award, the Best Actress for her role in *Tatlong Taong Walang Diyos* filmed in 1976. Subsequently, Laurice Guillen directed her in *Kung Ako'y Iiwan Mo* (1980) while Ishmael Bernal directed her in *Ikaw ay Akin* (1978) and *Bakit May Pag-ibig Pa?* (1979). Nora's acting prowess impressed both directors. In the middle of the year, Nora was doing three pictures simultaneously. These were *Ibilanggo si Neneng Magtanggol*, *Kaming mga Mukhang Pera*, and her reunion with Tirso Cruz III, *Pinakasalan Ko ang Ina ng Aking Kapatid*. Since her marriage was headed for naught, Nora and Christopher began discussions on separation of properties. NV Productions for Television produced a show titled *Pipwede* with Tirso Cruz III as headliner. Nora signed a movie contract with FPJ productions; her first team-up with Fernando "Ronnie" Poe, Jr. was titled *Little Christmas Tree*. Nora's younger brother, Eddieboy (Buboy) Villamayor, figured in a car accident which resulted in the death of one of the Sandico brothers whom Eddieboy got close with while filming *Alkitrang Dugo* produced by NV Productions. Nora stood by Eddieboy in his recovery from that accident.

1978. Nora's acting was heightened by her exposure to the styles of other film directors like Romy Suzara in *Hello, Goodnight, Goodbye* and Eddie Garcia in *Atsay* (1978). Nora did a film produced by Regal Films, *Mahal Mo, Mahal Ko*, a love triangle with Christopher de Leon and Tirso Cruz, III as



her leading men. In the Metro Manila Film Festival, Nora had two film entries, *Atsay* and *Jack en Jill*, with Dolphy; both were top-grossers. Nora received her Best Performer award during the MMFF Awards Night for her role in *Atsay*. Noranians were successful in raising funds for the National Mental Hospital. The project was dubbed Mamera Para Kay Nora.

1979. Since this was the time the trend in filmmaking was based on disco music, Nora decided to do *Annie Batungbakal* for NV Productions. Most of her showbiz friends pulled in their resources in making this a reality. Nora did a film, *Ina Ka ng Anak Mo*, with Lolita Rodriguez and directed by Lino Brocka. This movie became an entry to the MMFF along with her other movie, *Kasal-Kasalan, Bahay-Bahayan*, co-starring Christopher de Leon, Rudy Fernandez, and Alma Moreno. Both pictures were top-grossers in the film festival. *Kasal-Kasalan, Bahay-Bahayan* won the Best Picture award while Nora and Lolita tied for the Best Actress award.

1980. Lino Brocka again directed Nora in *Bona*. Plans for the film on faith healing, *Himala*, to be directed by Ishmael Bernal were laid out. Nora seriously considered the terms that the film be concluded as scheduled without interruptions from other film assignments and that it should be her sole entry to the MMFF. The film *Kastilyong Buhangin*, with Lito Lapid, an action star, became a hit. This time Nora was having problems with the Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR); the situation peaked in 1982 when BIR agents confronted her at her father's wake. Fans planned to donate a peso each to raise a million; Nora declined the offer.

1981. Nora shared the Best Actress award for *Bona* (1980) with Gina Alajar for *Brutal* (1980) at the MMFF. *Bona* was included for exhibition at the 1981 Cannes Film Festival's Director's Fortnight. She flew to Paris from Ma-

nila together with Phillip Salvador and Brocka. The film as well as Nora's performance received very good reviews. Francis Cruel of *Cinematographe* comments on the film: "The symbol of water is seen in the monsoon rains which fall when Bona lives with Gardo for the first time. It is also in the pump where one fills a can after a long wait. Finally, it is in the bath which Bona prepares for Gardo and the pot of boiling water which ultimately destroys — water at the same time fire . . . With Lino Brocka, the fusion is cataclysmic...Nora Aunor evokes Giulietta Masina in *La Strada* - a Gelsomina to keep company with the kid who acted superbly in *The Bicycle Thieves* . . . . In Cannes, while Isabelle Adjani stares hypnotically at photographers like the virgin of Sweet Bird of Youth, Nora Aunor sips in everything with pleasure, keeping distance of anonymity."

1982. Nora accepted the deal to star as lesbian lawyer opposite archrival Vilma Santos in *T-Bird at Ako* directed by Danny Zialcita for Film Ventures Productions. Nora also flew to the United States and brought films, *Ibalik ang Swerti* and *Rock 'n Roll*, which were booked in San Francisco's Apollo Theatre. A bonus appearance at the lobby cued the theater owner to have a firetruck on standby for dispersing a potentially wild crowd. Her adventure in the U.S. included watching concerts of popular singers like Tom Jones, Tony Orlando, and Frank Sinatra. Nora's father, Papay Tayoy, died. Nora starred in Experimental Cinema of the Philippine's *Himala*, which set Nora's agenda for the decade and confirmed her closeness to the Marcoses. The executive producer of the film was Imee Marcos. It is said that Nora agreed to do the project with the promise that the government would overwrite her debts at the BIR with the help of Marichu Vera-Perez Maceda. The film competed at the Berlin Film Festival and Nora almost won the Best Actress award. But at the Metro

Manila Film Festival, in which estranged husband Christopher de Leon took home the Best Actor trophy for the film *Haplos*, which starred Vilma Santos, she was the winner. Nora also won another Best Actress prize from the Catholic Mass Media Award for a performance in the film *Bakit Bughaw ang Langit* (1981) directed by Mario O' Hara. The years after *Himala* were fruitful, with Nora making such creditable films as *Bulaklak sa City Jail*, *Condemned*, and *'Merika*, all in 1984.

1983. Nora received the prestigious TOWNS Award (The Outstanding Women in the Nation's Service), her first national non-showbusiness award. She was ranked among prominent personalities in the field of medicine, journalism, foreign service, and education. Nora broke the news to her children about the birth of their half-brother Sandino, the lovechild of their father Christopher and companion, the actress Sandy Andolong. Such explanation confirmed to the children, who all bear de Leon as their surname, the score between Nora and Christopher. Maria Theresa Ana, nicknamed Matet, came into her life. She was Nora's second adopted child. Much later, Nora would adopt two more boys, Kenneth and Kiko. Matet pursued a child-star career for a few years, but had to eventually back down.

1985. Nora made a comeback of sorts by reviving the Guy and Pip loveteam in commercially successful films like *Till We Meet Again* and *I Can't Stop Loving You*. This comeback again lends credence to Nora's ability to reinvent herself, and elicit excitement for a two-decade-old love team. Inspired by this success, Viva Films signed her up for a three-picture contract. Nora starred in *Tinik sa Dibdib* and *Beloved*, but failed to finish *Victory Joe*, heralded as an anti-US Bases movie. The decade would end with a resounding partnership with Tirso in *Bilangin ang Bituin sa Langit* (1989),

an epic pastoral film allegorizing Nora's own ascent to success through a work ethic honed by suffering and to some extent ambivalent vengeance.

1986. Nora campaigned for the Marcoses, but when they fled she went to EDSA, only to be mobbed as she tossed slippers to the crowd. A witness relates that as Nora's car was being rocked, the crowd could hear Nora wailing "Pakinggan nyo naman ako." A year later, Nora cohabited with jazz singer Richard Merk, much to the chagrin of fans.

1988. Nora started her aborted debut as director in the vehicle with a working title *The Greatest Performance*, a story of a singing star who falls into addiction and picks herself up in the end.

1989. Nora's show *Superstar* signed off. But in December of the year, it was sort of revived via *The Legend Superstar* in IBC 13 to complement a drama anthology series for the same station. ABS-CBN 2 also contracted her for a season in the program *Star Drama Theater Presents Nora* years later. In 1995, Nora appeared in another drama anthology series, *Nora*, for Channel 5. All these were shortlived, running only for a season at the longest.

1990. Nora began the decade with a low-budget film, *Andrea, Paano Ba Ang Maging Isang Ina*, which speaks of the story of a university professor who becomes a communist cadre; she leaves her son to a colleague when she joins the movement. But when she comes back to reclaim him, conflict between two friends rankles. It was entered at the annual Metro Manila Film Festival in December and dismally fared at the tills. From hereon, Nora would make movies only for the festival, which was a symptom of her inability to touch base with the mainstream and be booked in commercial playdates; the December festival is administered by the local government and enforces the rule that all theaters in the greater

metropolitan area of Manila only show festival films. Succeeding films for the festival included *Ang Totoong Buhay ni Pacita M.* (1991) and *Inay* (1993).

1991. Nora held a very successful live concert titled *Handog ni Guy* at the Araneta Coliseum on May 18 as her birthday offering (May 21). In 1994, Nora recorded her most recent original album titled *Langit Pala ang Umibig* produced by Freddie Aguilar, and did a series of lounge shows for the Captain's Bar of the Manila Mandarin Hotel. Nora also essayed her first role in theater in the PETA play *Minsa'y Isang Gamu-Gamu* to protest attempts of the Cory Aquino government to prevent the abrogation of the U.S. Bases Treaty by the Philippine Senate. The next year, she did another play on Philippine domestic workers, *DH*, again for PETA.

1995. Nora starred in *The Flor Contemplacion Story*, the tale of the Filipina maid hanged in Singapore, and broke all existing box-office records at that time. She received her first international acting award from the Cairo International Film Festival for the said film, which also won Best Picture. With this success chalked up for a mainstream production, Viva Films, Nora gathered enough steam to film *Muling Umawit ang Pusong* at the end of the year; the project again allegorizes Nora's conflicting engagement with an industry that she has failed and has failed her. The next year, she did *Bakit May Kahapon Pa*, a compelling thriller involving a woman, daughter of victims of militarization, who stalks her family's executioner, referencing in a chilling manner the military technocracy of the government of President Fidel Ramos. In 1997, she made a small film *Mama Dito Sa Aking Pusong*, a reprise of Lino Brocka's *Hello Soldier* episode of the *Tatlo, Dalawa, Isa* trilogy. It starred her adopted daughter Matet. By this time, she was living in with Amerasian rapper John Rende.

1999. Fresh from the campaign that installed friend and colleague Joseph Estrada as President, Nora did *Sidhi*, in which she plays a mute simpleton of a farm heiress who is taken advantage by a gigolo, for the President's brother and 70s producer Jesse Ejercito's outfit. With the President on her side, Nora's moon would wax again. She sang the National Anthem at the Presidential inauguration in Luneta, received the Centennial Honors for the Arts for the 100 Filipino art figures of the century, and staged a concert on December 5 titled *Alay ni Guy sa Bagong Milenyong*. Nora would also do a government advertisement for the program billed "Bangon Na, Kabayan Ko," ostensibly to instill self-reliance and work ethic among a purportedly complacent but potentially industrious population.

While it is constantly repeated that Nora's success was phenomenal and sustained, it is difficult to forward empirical evidence to validate crucial claims. For example, it is a known fact in industry circles that box-office results are not reported and if so, they are either padded or scaled down, depending on the interest being served. Hence, I feel that it is sufficient to point to the numerous awards of popularity (besides the artistic ones) that Nora had garnered through the years to credit her success. Apart from this, Nora's ability to persevere from the late 60s to the present testifies to a tenacious staying power of a female star, regardless of its frequent lows in the last two decades. No other woman of her kind in the business has achieved such feat, except perhaps archrival Vilma Santos, who comes close to Nora's phenomenal depth and scope but does not manage to challenge it. Needless to say, Nora's involvement in radio, television (through a variety show and a drama anthology series), movies (as actress and producer), recording, theater, product endorsements for print and television, local and international

live performances for the longest time, and still counting, as well as her loyal following who have oral histories of Nora's heyday, can allow us to circumspectly contend that, indeed, Nora's superstardom is secure. As a journalist proclaims: "On record, she's the only film star at one given time whose movies were screened one after the other, or almost at the same time, and still, made money for their producers." (Red 2000, 3-D). We can only imagine how many times her films would be reshowed, her records replayed, and her folklore reminisced in the years to come by the nostalgic memory of succeeding generations. It is not surprising, for instance, that at the turn of the century, a *retro* fashion store has appropriated Nora's face as a central image for T-shirts and other clothing paraphernalia.

Rustom Quinto, for his part, makes it appear that Nora's popularity was, indeed, unerringly awesome:

Kapag may bagong damit si Nora, ginagaya rin nila ang tabas nito. Kapag naka T-shirt naman si Nora, naghahanap din sila ng ganoong uring T-shirt. Kapag ganoong disenyo ang damit o pantalon ni Nora, ganoon din ang gusto nilang isuot." (Quinto 159)

Kapag sinabi ni Nora sa radyo at telebisyon na ganoong softdrinks ang inumin, sunuran din sila. Kapag ganoong sabon ang ibubunsod ni Nora, bilihan din sila. Kapag sinabi ni Norang ganoong uring katol ang bibilhin, ito'y naging mabenta. (Quinto 159)

Moreover, Quinto discloses that this popularity translated into the success of the movie-magazine industry and the entire entertainment media; fashion accessories and other teen trends; politicians on the campaign trail; and other businesses known to be patronized by Nora.

But in the interests of empirical reckoning, we can infer from the box-office profile of the entries to the Metro Ma-

nila Film Festival from 1977-1997. The Festival is an artificial market condition the government sets for the industry; it blocks the Christmas week annually for the run of 6-10 Philippine films without the benefit of Hollywood competition. Nora participated in the Festival 12 times, with 14 entries, having two for the years 1979 and 1980. Her biggest hits, ranking second or third overall, prove to be *Bakya Mo Neneng* (1977), *Atsay* (1978), *Kasal-Kasalan, Bahay-Bahayan* (1979), *Himala* (1982), and *I Can't Stop Loving You* (1987). After the latter film, it was downhill for Nora. Her festival films from 1990 to 1997 would rank fifth or sixth in a field of six. Her last film for the festival, *Babae* (1997), ranked fifth overall in a six-cornered competition.

Finally, it is important to situate the emergence of Nora in Philippine film history. It can be noted that Nora straddled the transitional moment in the shift in the late 50s from the traditional studio structure to a "deregulated" film market driven by independent film firms which got by through "quickie" productions aping foreign trends. The collapse of the studio system gave way to the proliferation of ersatz Hollywood versions of spaghetti western, detective-flick, soft-porn, kung-fu, and sci-fi projects. Nora worked with Sampaguita Pictures but later transferred to Tower Productions. The former belonged to a residual culture of making movies marked by long-range planning and a consciousness for quality, while the latter represented the dominant form of filmmaking practice which maximized the star status of current media models as well as the fascination of the audience with the fashion of the moment. Nora, therefore, would engage in what industry insiders call the *lagare* (literally "saw" to reference to-and-fro movement) mode of making a killing in the business in which the *artista* does several films simultaneously. Nora's biography tellingly captures this set-up:



Her next starrer with Tower, *My Beloved*, with Rita Gomez, Luis Gonzales, and Edgar Mortiz, ay natapos in just one week. Binibiro pa nga si Direk noon na “fastest gun alive;” kasi kaya niyang tapusin ang pelikula kahit in four days lamang. Those were the days na kahit pakantahin lang si Guy sa ilalim ng puno at tapusin ang pelikula sa iisang locale ay pipilahan pa rin ng tao. Puwede ngang nagda-dial lamang sa telepono si Guy at nagbabasa ng telephone directory. People would still line up at the box-office. (Jimenez 1983 V.1, 108)

But Nora as phenomenal star of the Martial Law period also defied the dominance of bomba (soft-porn) in the late 60s and on the onset of the military dictatorship of Marcos; the genre was a legacy of the cinematic political economy of the period. To some extent, Nora’s wholesome image and Cinderella mythology “disciplined” the passions of a restive body politic as well as inured them to a rosy appreciation of the dispensation and its nation-building initiatives. However, in 1976, Nora starred in the first Filipino anti-U.S. Bases film, and therefore undercut the impression that she was a thoroughly establishment figure and finally faceted Nora’s constitution as a contradictory subject of Philippine cinema. From then on, Nora collaborated with such filmmakers as Lino Brocka, Ishmael Bernal, Mario O’Hara, and Laurice Guillen who leavened their films with a distinct political and artistic sensibility and paved the way for a “new” Philippine cinema in the image of a “new wave.” But paralleling this predisposition was Nora’s continuing engagement with the more “mainstream” structures of the industry, capitalizing on a youth culture that facilitated multiple cross-overs of media: radio, television, recording, and film. Even in the present, Nora frequently shifts temper in the choice of projects, ably negotiating the requirements of both “independent” and “mass-market” mechanisms.

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