

Mano Po 5: Gua Ai Di

By: Tiffany Ong

A rich girl falls in love with a common boy to the utter dismay and condemnation of her manic mother. The forbidden love affair goes through the challenges, comedy and drama of meetings with the parents, a lopsided love triangle, and constant sabotage, all to end happily ever after when the collective third party realizes that nothing should get in the way of true love. This is roughly the template for the fifth installment of the Mano Po franchise. Of course, the entire plot has a Chinese-Filipino theme presented through the ethnicity of the characters, Fookien dialogues, traditional costumes, classical Chinese instrumentals, and Charity (Angel Locsin) breaking into educational tidbits on Chinese culture. These moments conspicuously and unflinchingly begin with “*Kasi sa Chinese...*” which is reminiscent of previous Mano Po movies. According to Regal executive producer Lily Monteverde, this teen romance continues the Mano Po tradition, but at the same time offers something new. “If previous ‘Mano Po’ movies focused on Chinoys, this latest installment features the marriage of Chinese and Filipino cultures.” Another difference among the movies is their genres. The first three could be classified as dramas with somber storylines on racist kidnapping, dysfunctional families and marital infidelity. The fourth, “Ako Legal Wife,” is quite seriously a joke, while the latest is a quintessential Filipino style romantic comedy.

If you’ve been watching movies or TV, there’s a fine chance you’ll be slapping yourself on the forehead throughout the movie thinking “I’ve seen that from somewhere.” You might even become preoccupied with trying to remember from which Hollywood movies or song lyrics “Mano Po” borrowed its myriad winning scenes and punch lines from. Here are a few which were impossible for at least this movie watcher to ignore. The close-up shots of food and cooking along with the culinary inspired quotes were patterned after Ang Lee’s “Eat Drink Man Woman.” Nathan’s (Richard Gutierrez) food allergy mishap reminds us of “Hitch,” and the script is similar to oh just every other Filipino love story. Picture this: love at first sight when Angel and Richard share an umbrella in the pouring rain. They stare spellbound into each other’s eyes to the music of Christian Bautista as the camera circles around them in whimsical slow motion. Shrieks of delight erupt from fans in the audience. “Why present unabashed unoriginality in what is supposed to be a promotion of high quality Philippine cinema?” one would venture to ask, but then the bottom line even in the Metro Manila Film Festival is still ticket sales and commercial viability. Can’t argue with figures.

Another thing critics can’t argue with is the stellar performance of this film’s cast of actors and actresses. Following a cheesy script is one thing, to deliver cheesy lines and make them sound perfectly natural however, is one heck of a feat. Angel Locsin impressed in her portrayal of Charity. She nailed the bright, nice girl part but could switch to aggressive, humorous or dejected in a snap without losing the subtleties. Christian Bautista also merits a special mention for his onscreen debut. He was a perfect fit for the role of childhood sweetheart turned Asian superstar and tragic lover, the type of villain that audiences could fall in love with. The only annoying thing is that his songs get stuck in your head forever. Lorna Tolentino more than succeeded in aggravating audiences as ultra vain, semi-psychotic, domineering mom, Yolanda. Few others can pull off the character as gracefully and as effectively. One can imagine the difficulty of speaking in broken Filipino, a foreign dialect and acting crazy with perfect comic timing and dramatic effect.

Speaking of the foreign dialect, it was significantly less bastardized in “Mano Po 5” compared to the earlier installments. The actors’ Fookien was acceptable except for a few mispronunciations which were understandable but nevertheless cringe-worthy for those who know the dialect. Considering that “Mano Po” is supposedly based on real Chinese Filipino culture and the fact that a Chinoy produced it, one would hope that the movies would attempt to be as accurate as possible not just in the matter of language. A handful of inconsistencies and outright fallacies in the film however, were disappointing. Many of the “Chinese” qualities and practices shown are outdated and bizarre but have been injected anyway for entertainment value and to increase the sort of mystery and foreign flavor that viewers expect and look for in the series. It’s seriously damaging since the cost of entertainment comes at the price of reinforcing misconceptions, ignorance, insult and far-reaching social repercussions in what has been described by some critics as “racist ridicule” and “a self-inflicted ethnic joke.” The trivial examples come first: contrary to the entire series, Fil-Chi’s do not wear *cheongsams* and *qipaos* everyday, especially not in their own homes. Another is that Chinoy’s of Yolanda’s generation don’t speak broken Filipino with an accent. Almost all speak Filipino fluently and some even better than their children. There are several more relevant examples but one of the most striking and consequential for me is the way the film labeled discrimination based on racial prejudice as a distinctly Chinese cultural tradition. Prejudice is not a traditional Chinese practice handed down to younger generations; it is a social tradition that exists in any and all cultures of the world. It’s true that situations like Charity’s and Nathan’s exist, but one should not confuse Chinese culture with individual and social mentalities the way the movie does. In hindsight, the characteristics of Chinese tradition as presented in the film were essentially funny to the point of ridiculousness, oppressive, prejudiced, and let’s not forget, quaint and a little weird with all those lucky symbols and rituals.

On the other hand, production in general was decent. The dream sequences added something new and interesting to the mix though the special effects weren’t quite mind-blowing. Also, quick transitions helped maintain the flow and keep it from getting dragging but could get awkward and distracting for drastically different scenes when singing and music abruptly begin and end. In the end, technical aspect plays an important role but it’s still the heart of the movie, the story, which defines it.

“The Sound of Music... Again”

By: Julius Barcelona

“The hills are ali-ive, with the sound of mu-usic!” Oh yes, who can ever forget those overused words in the opening of Richard Rodgers’ and Oscar Hammerstein’s musical, the Sound of Music? Not me, that’s for sure. That the song is floating around the inside of my cranium, surfacing every moment I stop typing this to think, is solid evidence of the production’s musical impact, which usually provokes nostalgia in some people and not a small amount of irritation in others. I think I’m somewhere in between.

I do not exaggerate when I say overused. The Sound of Music is one of the most staged productions I know of. It has been produced, bent, torn up, tortured and manhandled nearly all over the world in all kinds of languages into, well, basically the same thing, with extras (and some things taken away).

So, excluding the said extra little bits that have the uncanny tendency to seduce the proud director, the Sound of Music tells the story of Maria Rainer, a postulant, otherwise known as a

nun-in-training, at the Nonnberg Abbey. Maria is a carefree, spirited girl who loves nothing more than singing and dancing and having fun, i.e. everything a nun should try to avoid. Quite obviously, she is deemed unsuited for the disciplined and well-ordered life of the abbey, and so the Mother Abbess sends her away to become a governess for the 7 children of Captain George von Trapp.

She arrives at the von Trapp household to something she considers a disaster; the Captain is unsmiling, uncompromising and pretty much everything that begins with an “un-”; the children are forced to march around and answer to the blow of a whistle like animals, and, goodness gracious, no one is allowed—or seems to know how—to sing or even laugh! So Maria, being the incarnation of song and cheer that she is, sits the children down and attempts to turn this right. She succeeds, and in the process, the Captain falls in love with her. They get married just as Hitler decides that Austria’s been free too long, and soon the Nazis are running all over the place, demanding that the Captain join their navy in the Third Reich. Clearly not wanting to do so, they slip away during a local festival and escape with the help of the Nonnberg nuns. But then you probably know that already. Thank you Walt Disney.

In the year 1980, Repertory Philippines decided to join the ranks of theatre groups which have produced the Sound of Music, decided one run wasn’t enough, and produced it again just late last year, the latter of which I watched. I can’t compare the shows with each other though, seeing as I wasn’t even born until 9 years after the first production, so I’ll stick to dissecting the more recent one.

In any case, there’s nothing to be done about the musical score; it’s a tried and true mix of favorites that almost anyone, or at the very least anyone with a VHS player, will instantaneously and most likely unconsciously begin humming or even singing to as soon as they hear it. I should know; I half-expected Julie Andrews to come waltzing out onto the stage the moment those opening notes began to play. Instead we got a couple of actresses in habits singing something in Latin before we got Maria singing that annoying and wonderful song on a pseudo-mountaintop. As far as the music goes, I can’t complain. I just applauded, like everyone else in the theatre.

Well, nothing is perfect in the world. While the musical was faithful enough to the original production (as if they had a choice), the direction was, for me, a little iffy. People just seemed to be flitting on and off the stage for absolutely no purpose whatsoever in a way reminiscent of a jack-in-a-box. They just pop in to say something or to sing a song, then leave. Perhaps they have an incredibly powerful auditory ability that allows them to hear someone calling offstage whom they must attend to each time they finish a song. Perhaps.

Still, despite the problems with the direction, the audience went with it rather well. Of course, it’s an old favorite; who wouldn’t love to see or hear something that holds many long forgotten memories for them again? Well, maybe not everyone (myself included), but more or less. Nostalgia like disco, only without the funky clothes.

3 out of 5.