

Brillante Mendoza discusses *Lola*

Richard Phillips
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Philippines director Brillante Mendoza has directed nine features in the past five years—The Masseur, Kaleldo, Manoro, Pantasya, Foster Child, Tirador, Serbis, Kinatay. He spoke with the WSWS about Lola, his latest movie, during the Sydney Film Festival.

Richard Phillips: Could you explain the difference between your movies and those dominating popular Philippines cinema? And how you developed your stylistic approach?

Brillante Mendoza: My films are quite different to the formula-style movies shown in the Philippines and by that I mean the many melodramas and the associated star system. Although I use professional actors, the ones I generally use are non-mainstream ones. If I use mainstream people, they adapt to the style of acting I'm trying to develop in my films. My work is quite different and my approach to stories and visual approach is something new to general audiences.

If you're asking whether my films are popular in the Philippines, then they are not. There are people who have acknowledged my films and my talent but few people necessarily have seen them and if I get theatrical releases these are on a very limited run basis.

My plan is for my films to be shown in schools. I'm more excited about doing that than showing my films in commercial cinemas. To show any film in a commercial theatre you have to really spend a lot of money on promotion and publicity. This involves a huge amount of money, which I don't have. Most of my films are very low-budget works even by comparison to Philippine standards.

I find it more fulfilling to show my movies at

universities and to organisations where people come to really watch the film, rather than movie stars, and to appreciate what I'm trying to do.

RP: Did you use professional actors in *Lola*?

BM: The two *lolas* [grandmothers] are both professionals. Anita Linda has been in about 200 films—she's been acting since the 1940s and 50s. The other—Rustica Carpio—was very active acting during the 1970s and appeared in movies made by Lina Brocka. I don't know whether you know Brocka. Unfortunately, he is quite unknown outside the Philippines.

And like all other film industries, older actresses, apart from some work on television, get fewer roles. Older women rarely are asked to play lead roles in movies as they did *Lola*.

RP: What inspired *Lola*?

BM: My stories are all about real people. For example, my writer and I saw a television news item about a grandmother seeking help for the release of her grandson who had been jailed because he had accidentally killed somebody. And then we heard about another item about an old lady begging for money to be able to bury her grandson. We tried to connect these two stories and put them into a narrative and that's how the story developed. There were some revisions along the way, of course.

Lola was developed about three years ago but I was unable to find a producer. I submitted it to several international script development funds but without success until I won at Cannes [for *Kinatay* (2009)]. After that I was able to persuade my producer that we had to do this film.

glimpse of what it is like to be put in this situation.

RP: Could you comment on your cinematic influences?

BM: To be honest I always look toward the great Hollywood filmmakers. I started out in television commercials and doing mainstream work as a production designer. My training was with mainstream directors and filmmakers but I developed my own style when I started shooting *The Masseur*. Before each scene I always ask myself, “Is this the right thing to do, am I being truthful, is this what I want to see on screen?” With each film I’m also learning and being awakened by my subject matter and characters.

I’m always trying to learn and so I watch all sorts of films but it wasn’t until the latter part of the 1990s, with the internet and DVDs, that we were able to get access to decent international cinema in the Philippines. Eventually I discovered [Francois] Truffaut and [Vittorio] De Sica. After watching *400 Blows* for the third time—the first occasions I didn’t pay enough attention—I became more and more aware of its significance. So these filmmakers and the Italian neo-realists have had a big influence on my work.

RP: Could you further elaborate on the story?

BM: It’s about two women in their twilight years who are trying to help the people that they really love. It’s not just about poverty but also the resilience of these old Filipino women who might not have great physical strength but have tremendous will power.

When you’re poor you really don’t have many choices and that’s what you see in the film. For the less fortunate and less privileged, life is very difficult and I want to show this reality in my films—even if it goes against what official society perceives to be right and good.

This is my approach because I believe in the truth and trying to make my films as honest as I can. Not only must the acting be truthful, but the cinematography, production design and all other aspects. And I always try to have the particular communities playing a major part in all my films. This is necessary in order for us to understand what their lives are really like. For instance in *Lola* there’s a lot of rain and I did this in order to show what difficulties this creates for these communities. I wanted this ambience and the constant movement of water. Rain is a metaphor for life and for death. It is the source of life but at the same time it can be the source of destruction and catastrophe, which not only happens in Manila but many parts of the world.

RP: The two grandmothers are driven by social circumstances to reach an out of court settlement. Could you explain this?

BM: This is because they’re poor and cannot afford lawyers—one grandmother can barely afford to bury her murdered grandson—so they have little choice. For the rich, these issues are not a problem. What I’m trying to show that even so-called justice is determined by your status in life.

RP: The prisons, as you show, are desperately overcrowded with young men.

BM: Yes that’s right. Of course the situation in the jails is another big story but my movie did provide a



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