

# **Guerillas in the Midst: A Narrative on the Rise of Mindanao Cinema in the Digital Age**

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In celebrating the centennial of Philippine cinema (2017-2019), it is important to highlight the contribution of Mindanao's filmmaking movement to the field, especially since in the last decade and a half, the rebirth of Mindanao cinema has been nothing short of remarkable.

In the 1950s and well into the early 1970s, Mindanao had a film industry with Davao as its hub. Some would call it an offshoot or extension of Cebuano cinema because the films produced were in the Visayan language, but it was actually an industry all its own. Unfortunately, there seems to be no more prints of films from that era, nor has Mindanao's cinema roots been well-documented by film or cultural historians or even by entertainment reporters during that time. Clearly, some extensive research must be done to rediscover these precious years of Mindanao cinema.

Many might be wondering why I call the last decade and a half the rebirth of Mindanao cinema. Allow me to take you through this industry's second coming, which began in the early 2000s. The filmmaking movement in Mindanao is so dynamic and multifaceted that each film group, organization, or community has its own interesting story to tell. But this narrative is based on my perspective.

For me, it all started in 2003. I had just dropped out of college to start a film and video production company the previous year. I was riding on

the wave of digital technology and how it was changing the film and video production landscape. The rise of digital video cameras and computer-based nonlinear video editing made production more cost-efficient and accessible to more people. But my friend Drei Boquiren, who worked with me, and I were growing frustrated. We could hardly find others in Davao City who had the same interest in making films as us, and we didn't like the idea that we had to go to Metro Manila to be part of the filmmaking industry. For filmmaking to thrive in Mindanao, we felt that there had to be a community of local filmmakers supporting and encouraging each other in honing their craft. So we decided to take matters into our own hands and started a filmmaking workshop.

We wanted a workshop that would attract those who also had our same passion, the same gung-ho spirit we had about filmmaking. We wanted people who would do whatever it takes to get their stories out there. So in October 2003, with the help of other like-minded friends like Bagane Fiola, we launched the Guerrilla Filmmaking Workshop. It was a workshop where participants went through a six-day crash course on guerrilla-style filmmaking, then made a short film for another six days. The workshop culminated with a film festival at Gaisano Mall in Davao, where paying audiences got to see the participants' films on the big screen. The first festival screened three short films and three documentaries.

The workshop and film festival seemed like a complete success, but in reality it was almost a complete disaster. None of us had any experience in organizing a workshop, let alone a film festival. The workshop participants were bombarded with too much information, we pressured them into finishing their films in just six straight days, and the screening of the films during the festival started almost two hours late. In fact, when screening started in the theater, some films were still being rendered in the computer!

But this experience did not dissuade us. We knew that what we were doing was making an impact and was too important to abandon. So we learned from our experience and improved on the process. In 2004, the workshop ran through three weekends of October, and we gave the participants two weeks to make their films. We also moved the film festival to December. Because of all these adjustments, we had more workshop participants and more films, the outputs were far better, and we were able to extend the duration of the film festival to four days.

In 2005, we went even further, opening our doors to other filmmakers interested in screening their films during the Guerrilla Filmmaking Festival. Aside from showing the films created by workshop participants, we decided to accept films that were either made by a Mindanaoan filmmaker, was shot in Mindanao, or was about Mindanao.

In the same year, while guesting in a media forum to announce our call for entries for the festival, we were asked by one of the other guests, a military general, if we were in any way connected to the communist rebel group, the New People's Army. It was a friendly query, and it wasn't the first time that we were asked this question, owing to our use of the word "guerrilla" for our festival title. We would always explain that "guerilla" denotes the style of filmmaking prevalent in the films being made in Mindanao, and it also represents the type of passion, spirit, and persistence necessary to make a film in this part of the country. But to avoid further misinterpretations, we decided to change the name of the festival to the Mindanao Film Festival.

The festival became a bigger event that year. It ran for a whole week, and there were more activities. And to keep the "guerrilla" theme alive, we created the Guerrilla Filmmaking Competition, where production teams, including those that joined the workshop, all made their films at the same time in a span of two weeks. We also organized the Mindanao Film Congress. Our speakers included filmmakers Maryo J. delos Reyes, Sunshine Matutina, Milo Tolentino, Ed Lejano and a film critic, the late Alexis Tioseco. All the participants saw the need to create an organization in Mindanao that would focus on promoting Mindanao films and helping to further filmmaking in Mindanao. In 2007, the Mindanao Film & Television Development Foundation was created, born out of that resolution. The foundation's mission was "to further promote, protect, and develop the film and television industry of Mindanao." It subsequently took over the Guerrilla Filmmaking Workshop, including the Mindanao Film Festival and its other related events. The foundation has allowed us to more easily work and partner with educational institutions, government agencies, and other NGOs.

We credit Tioseco for "discovering" us. He played a key role in bridging us with some of our counterparts in Metro Manila. He believed in what we were doing and inspired us to continue with our vision. I remember he was invited by ANC (ABS-CBN News Channel) to talk about the Metro Manila Film Festival, but he instead spent half the time talking about the Mindanao Film Festival and even wore a Mindanao Film Festival shirt! One of the people that Alexis connected us with was filmmaker Sherad Sanchez. In 2006, Sanchez, already known for his short films in Manila, got a seed grant from Cinema One Originals to produce his film *Ang Huling Balyan ng Buhi* [*Woven Stories of the Other*] (2006). This film has been an important milestone in Mindanao Cinema because not only was it the first Mindanaoan full-length film to be produced in decades, but it also brought together many film workers and talents in Mindanao that produced a feature film that competed in a national film festival for the first time.

The production of *Huling Balyan ng Buhi* was riddled with so many problems, from being unable to raise the necessary budget that Sanchez's original vision for the film required, to the cold, rainy weather that wreaked havoc on the production schedule and budget. With the deadline looming close, the seed grant running out, and only less than 10% of usable footage shot, Sanchez brilliantly rewrote the story, shot the film guerrilla-style with just two crew members, and put three editors to work simultaneously to beat the festival's deadline. *Huling Balyan ng Buhi* went on to win Best Film in the 1st Cinema One Originals Film Festival. This win inspired many Mindanaoan filmmakers and made a few people from the film industry in Metro Manila, both independent and mainstream, take notice of films from Mindanao and even from the other regions. Later that year, Drei Boquiren was invited by the Independent Filmmakers Cooperative to make a film as part of a 16-film anthology about the Guimaras oil spill. His film *Ang Hele ni Guima*, which we shot entirely in Davao City, was broadcast on national television, together with the rest of the films in the anthology.

The year 2008 was a productive year for filmmaking in Mindanao as there were three full-length films on top of the many short films produced. Arnel Mardoquio, a Palanca awardee for his literary work, made his film directorial debut in *Hunghong sa Yuta*, Charliebebs Gohtia made *Thank You Girls*, and Sanchez made *Imburnal*, which won him again Best Film in the Cinema One Originals Film Festival. Also in the same year the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) Cinema Committee started giving grants to film festivals outside of Metro Manila as part of their Cinema in the Regions program. The Mindanao Film Festival was recognized by the committee for its efforts through the years and was one of the recipients of the grant. This marked the first time that the Mindanao Film Festival received financial support from a government agency at the national level, and this NCCA grant allowed the festival to thrive in the succeeding years.

Filmmaking in Mindanao continued to shine the next year. In January 2009, the CineMagis Film Festival in Cagayan de Oro City under Hobart Savior and Xavier University was established. Also a recipient of NCCA's grant, it catered to filmmakers and audiences in northern Mindanao. According to Hobart, its main purpose was to be the springboard for budding artists to tackle a wide range of social issues in Mindanao using film as the medium. The next month saw the launch of Cinema Rehiyon at the Cultural Center of the Philippines in Manila. A flagship project of the Cinema Committee of NCCA led by then-chair Dr. Mike Rapatan and then-vice-chair Teddy Co, it was a national film festival that showcased films from the different regions of the Philippines outside Metro Manila. Many full length and short films

from Mindanao, including films from both the Mindanao Film Festival and CineMagis, were screened. Cinema Rehiyon would encourage more films from Mindanao to be made in succeeding years. Then later in the year, two full-length films were produced: Mardoquio's *Hospital Boat* and Fiola's in *Way to the Sunset*, which was his first full-length.

The year 2010 was actually a very successful year for Mindanao films, and it cemented the role of Mindanao as an important contributor to Philippine cinema. We decided to hold a Guerrilla Filmmaking Workshop in General Santos City to jumpstart a filmmaking community in that region of Mindanao. One guest speaker for that workshop was Gutierrez "Teng" Mangansakan II, a Moro filmmaker and one of the pioneers of filmmaking in Mindanao. Though Mangansakan already made his documentary short *House under the Crescent Moon* in 2001 that won him the Gawad CCP for Alternative Film and Video, he finished *Limbunan* in early 2010—his first and also the first ever Bangsamoro full-length film, which was an entry in the Cinemalaya Philippine Independent Film Festival.

Other full-length films produced in Mindanao that year included *Balangay* by Sanchez; *Mananabang*, the film debut of Orvil Bantayan; *Ngilngig Films*, which was an omnibus of short horror films by Fiola; *Sheika* by Mardoquio, which won the NETPAC award at the Cinemalaya Film Festival and numerous awards at the Gawad Urian, including the Best Actress award for Fe "Ging-Ging" Hyde (as Sheika), the first time that a major acting award was given to a virtually unknown Mindanaon; and *Halaw*, the film debut of Sheron Dayoc that won the Best Film (New Breed Category) at the Cinemalaya Philippine Independent Film Festival.

As a testament to the dynamism of Mindanao cinema and to how far it has come, the NCCA Cinema Committee and festival directors from various parts of the country voted for Davao City to host the 3rd Cinema Rehiyon in 2011. It was the first time that the festival was held outside Metro Manila. I don't know if it was because we had too much of the guerrilla spirit in us or because we just wanted to prove a point, or perhaps it was a bit of both, that we accepted the challenge without hesitation. It turned out that it was a very unnerving task, with the NCCA Cinema Committee regularly checking on us to make sure everything went smoothly. We had a small budget to work with, so we had to come up with clever ways to make use of our limited resources. And we had to bring new things to the table to make the Cinema Rehiyon experience in Davao unique. In the end, we were able to prove that a national film festival could successfully be held outside Metro Manila. Cinema Rehiyon has since then become a "travelling" film festival, moving from one host locality to another and building new audiences and inspiring new filmmakers.

In 2012, the Film Development Council of the Philippines (FDCP) under chairman Briccio Santos organized the Sineng Pambansa National Film Festival in Davao City. Mindanao films that were given seed grants for that festival were *Tambara* by Bantayan, who was from Davao; *Duwaya* by Najib Alyhar Benito-Zacaria (Marawi); *Malan* written by Don Pagusara and directed by Benjie Garcia (Davao); *In Banka Halit Sin Duwa Sapah* by Fyred Alsad Alfad III (Jolo, Sulu); *Qiyamah* by Mangansakan (Maguindanao); and *Tagurih: The Kites of Sulu* by Dempster Samarista (Sulu). *Qiyamah* won a Grand Jury Prize, and its cinematographer, McRobert Nacario won Best Artistic Contribution. In the same year, FDCP opened the Cinematheque Davao and Cinematheque Marawi. These cinematheques gave people the opportunity to watch classic Filipino films, notable Mindanao films, and even acclaimed foreign films that would never have been shown in a commercial movie theater. These have also become venues for various film-related activities and workshops. Also notable in 2012 was Mardoquio winning multiple awards, including the Special Jury Prize in Cinema One Originals, Grand Jury Prize in the CineManila Film Festival, and Best Picture at the Gawad Urian awards for *Ang Paglalakbay ng mga Bituin sa Gabing Madilim*.

In 2013, more local film festivals sprouted in Mindanao. There was the Nabunturan Independent Film Exhibition (Nabifilmex) in Nabunturan, Compostela Valley Province, organized by festival director Atty. Karen Malaki, with the help of filmmakers Mardoquio, Bryan Jimenez, and Arnel Barbarona. Nabunturan had no movie theaters, but the town was able to build an active and passionate filmmaking community, producing films that became acclaimed in and outside the country. Six of these Nabunturan films were even screened during the 32nd International Festival Sarajevo.

There was also the Salamindanaw Film Festival in General Santos City launched by Mangansakan, Mardoquio, and Bordie Carillo. Now solely under Mangansakan, Salamindanaw has evolved to promote international cinema, with emphasis on strong cultural ties between Mindanao and its Southeast Asian neighbors. It was later on renamed to Salamindanaw Asian Film Festival. Meanwhile, Fiola, who a few years back made his own set of horror short films, wanted to encourage more local filmmakers to try out the genre, so he created the Ngilngig Film Festival, a film festival that showcases local horror, supernatural, or paranormal films.

The FDCP, as part of its Sineng Pambansa program and together with the city government of Zamboanga, also organized the Zamboanga International Film Festival in 2013. Aside from showing films from its Sineng Pambansa National Film Festival, this one-off festival showcased Spanish-language films, which was very much appreciated by the Chavacano-speaking people of Zamboanga City. Then during the latter part of the year, inspired by



similar efforts in Quezon City and Cebu, the local government of Davao City began committee hearings for a proposed Film Development Council. The proposed city ordinance was authored by city councilor and occasional local film actor Leo Avila, whose son also became a filmmaker.

There were several new developments in 2014. Another film festival in Mindanao came about, again in General Santos City, this time called the Lantawan Socksargen Film Festival, which was organized by Carillo and Mardoquio. This NCCA-funded festival focused on promoting local films from the Socksargen region as the Salamindanaw had become an international film festival. Cinema Rehiyon also finally came back to Mindanao for its 6th edition, this time held in the northern Mindanao city of Cagayan de Oro, home of the CineMagis Film Festival. Meanwhile, the FDCP continued its efforts in Zamboanga City by opening the Cinematheque Zamboanga and by launching the Guerrilla Filmathon, the world's first filmmaking adventure race. The filmathon gave participating filmmakers only 24 hours to complete their respective films while at the same time trying to overcome adventure race-style obstacles and challenges.

In 2015, the NCCA funded CineAnimo, another film festival in Mindanao, this time held in Ozamiz City. Meanwhile, the local government of Zamboanga City also organized not just one film festival but three, spread throughout the year: the Zamboanga Film Festival every Dia del Zamboanga, the Zamboanga Hermosa Film Festival every Zamboanga Hermosa Festival, and the Cine Chavacano every Dia de Fundacion de Chavacano. Aside from these, Fiola, in his effort to further develop the horror genre in Mindanao, organized the Ngilngig Film Camp, a weeklong stay-in filmmaking workshop that aimed to mine local supernatural- and paranormal-themed films.

In 2016, just a few weeks after her appointment, FDCP Chairperson Liza Diño-Seguerra had her first stakeholders' forum in Davao City to listen to the concerns of the filmmakers in Mindanao, and she pledged to support regional filmmaking efforts. Later in the year, she attended Nabifilmex in Nabunturan and pledged to build a cinematheque there. FDCP also gave financial assistance to some of the other film festivals in Mindanao.

Mindanao films also gained recognition in 2016. Fiola's *Baboy Halas* won the NETPAC jury prize in QCinema. It was also screened at the International Film Festival in Rotterdam and was accepted in the competition of the International Film Festival in Heidelberg. Dayoc's *Women of the Weeping River* won Best Film for both QCinema and Gawad Urian. And Mangansakan's *Moro2mrw: Daughters of the Three-tailed Banner* was screened in Warsaw, Poland.

In 2017, Barbarona made his first full-length film *Tu Pug Imatuy* and won Best Film at the Sinag Maynila Film Festival. Nabunturan hosted the

9th Cinema Rehiyon, which was the largest Cinema Rehiyon to date. And during the festival, the FDCP and the local government of Nabunturan had a ceremonial groundbreaking at the site of the future Cinematheque Nabunturan. Meanwhile, it was also in 2017 that the city ordinance to create the Film Development Council of Davao City passed its third and final reading.

So as you can see, quite a lot has happened since the humble beginnings of Mindanao cinema. We started with three short films. Now, we produce more than a hundred shorts films and at least two full-length ones every year. There are currently 10 film festivals in Mindanao, and our films are now being recognized here and abroad. Moreover, other film festivals such as Cinemalaya, QCinema, Cinema One, To Farm, Sinag Maynila, and Pista ng Pelikulang Pilipino have provided opportunities for our filmmakers to showcase their *obras*. It has to also be said that the digital and internet age has truly given more and more people from Mindanao the capability to make films. The internet has also become, through social media, an alternative means of promotion as well as distribution, via streaming or video-on-demand.

Yet despite all the progress and achievements that Mindanao cinema has had so far, it is still not yet there in terms of becoming a sustainable industry. Perhaps technology could greatly help, too, in this area. Or perhaps a combination of technology, legislation, and smart business strategies is required. Whatever it is, there is no stopping Mindanao cinema in its growth and development, and with full support from the government, the private sector, the academe, the arts and culture community, and the public, it can only get better. And perhaps for it to become better, it will have to resort to the very same methods its early filmmakers employed that allowed the industry to thrive for the past 15 years, that is, doing films the best way it knows how: guerrilla-style.

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