

Toronto International Film Festival 2016

***Ma' Rosa* from the Philippines: Small-time drug dealers set upon by the police**

By Dylan Lubao
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Ma' Rosa, the 14th film from Filipino director Brillante Mendoza, was screened at this year's Toronto International Film Festival. It was earlier premiered at Cannes, where the lead actress Jaclyn Jose won the award for Best Actress.

The film (with a screenplay by Troy Espiritu) opens in a brightly lit supermarket, where Rosa and her son Erwin (Jomari Angeles) are purchasing bulk goods to sell piecemeal at their corner, or "sari-sari" store. They exit into the rain, heat, and darkness of a typical Manila night and hail a taxi for the ride home. The cabbie unceremoniously dumps them some distance from their house and store, unwilling to enter one of Manila's myriad slums.

Drenched, Rosa and Erwin arrive home, which may as well be in a different universe from the supermarket. The sterile white walls of the latter are gone, replaced by a neighbourhood of narrow, rundown alleyways. Children play in the street and weave in between passing motorcycles as their parents wearily trudge home from work. Street hawkers peddle their wares, and older women sit outside gambling the night away. There is immense poverty here, but also an abundance of life and motion.

This is a scene immediately recognizable to tens of millions of Filipinos as more closely resembling everyday life than the dozens of stultifying telenovelas and game shows that currently litter the Philippine airwaves. The images are striking and stay with you long after the credits roll. Mendoza and cinematographer Odyssey Flores deserve credit for taking an unsentimental and untreated lens to ordinary Filipinos, providing glimpses of their vitality, humour and imperfections.

After this panorama, Rosa and her husband Nestor (Julio Diaz), an addict, are shown attending to their side business of selling crystal meth, or "ice", to supplement their store's income. Rosa goes out to buy dinner as Nestor takes another hit. Their other children arrive home and nonchalantly discuss selling ice to their friends or associates, with the proceeds going into the family's "savings account"—a shoebox.

Once again, it is to Mendoza's credit that he portrays Rosa and Nestor, and by implication the vast majority of small-time drug dealers, as poor people who have resorted to "drug pushing" to make ends meet under unforgiving social conditions. It is significant that as this reviewer exited the theatre, many fellow moviegoers could be overheard discussing poverty as the root cause of these types of petty crimes.

The release of *Ma' Rosa* comes in the midst of the so-called "drug war" of new Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte. A fascistic figure who, as mayor of Davao City, oversaw death squads responsible for the murders of hundreds of petty criminals, Duterte has taken his war on the poor to the national level. The current death toll stands at over 2,400—after just three months in office.

One is compelled to point out that the capitalists and landowners responsible for the mass suffering in the Philippines continue to enjoy cordial relations with the president's administration. They have had no war declared upon them.

On the other hand, Rosa, Nestor and their family are caught up in a police shakedown after being identified as dealers by a family friend. In exchange for Rosa's and Nestor's freedom, their children must come up with a \$10,000 bribe for the crooked, brutal cops. The

remainder of the movie takes up this torturous quest, and the private tragedies endured by each of the children.

Notwithstanding the sharpness of much of the film and its orientation to the poor and against the police, *Ma' Rosa* is a fairly narrow work. The camera work is reminiscent of a documentary shot with a handycam, and the viewer's constant proximity to the subject is often suffocating. It leaves the spectator very little time or adequate distance to think deeply about what's immediately on screen and its broader connection to social processes.

This ties in to Mendoza's quasi-neorealist leanings, as he follows in a mostly passive fashion the lives of the working class, the poor, or the marginalized, to the exclusion of a more wide-ranging depiction. There is an element of protest in Mendoza's films, but one also always feels that he is just scratching the surface, and is unwilling or unable to dig any deeper.

It is an outlook common to an entire milieu of the middle class intelligentsia in the Philippines, perhaps outraged at the injustice of bourgeois society but thoroughly disoriented by the lack of a left-wing political movement to moor them. What passes for the Philippine "left" is in fact a Maoist, pro-capitalist movement that has for decades conspired with the country's ruling class to keep masses of workers in chains. Even now, the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) is energetically working itself into Duterte's administration, so as to provide this murderous regime a "left" cover.

A former director of television commercials, Mendoza's contempt for the empty-headed quality of Philippine pop culture is a sympathetic position. However, he has not seriously worked through the questions that he tackles in his work. It is thus bitterly ironic that he has voiced support for Duterte, in fact directing the latter's State of the Nation Address and a series of anti-drug infomercials for the regime. There is, if not a direct, then at least a strong socio-cultural connection between the integration of the CPP into an extreme right-wing administration and Mendoza's immense confusion.

In earlier reviews of Mendoza's work, the WSWS noted that despite the director's obvious sympathy for the Filipino working class and poor, the limitations of his artistic and social outlook were clear—and these

problems have certainly not disappeared. While each of his films captures something truthful about the mass poverty, inequality and violence in the Philippines, each also fails to synthesize these component elements satisfyingly and convincingly into a more comprehensive picture.

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