Culture



Rachel Alejandro as Paula and Joanna Ampil as Candida in "The Portrait" (Culturtain Musical Productions Inc.)



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The painting depicts an episode from Virgil's *Aeneid* when the young mythical hero Aeneas bears his elderly father, Anchises, on his back, against the backdrop of the fall of the city of Troy, which has been reduced to an inferno. But there is something astonishing, if not unsettling, about this particular rendering: Aeneas and Anchises are one and the same person. It is, in fact, the artist's self-portrait. Aside from obscured glimpses, we are only allowed to see the work of art through the eyes of the characters whose imaginations it has bewitched and held captive. We, the audience, are bewitched and held captive.

"The Portrait" ("Ang Larawan," Philippines, 2017) is a beautifully realized theater-to-cinema ferrying of an eponymous 1997 Filipino musical. The musical's source material is a straight play in English — "Portrait of the Artist as Filipino" — written in 1950 by revered national artist Nick Joaquin.

Grainy documentary footage and a phonograph-quality musical elegy (expressively sung by Celeste Legaspi) usher us into Intramuros, the walled cultural and intellectual center of Spanish colonial Manila that, sadly, did not escape the ravages of World War II. Before we know it, the black-and-white scene transitions into full color. It is October 1941, on the eve of the war.

We are at the Marasigan residence, an old mansion with the virtual patina of bygone days of glory. The current residents are sisters Candida (Joanna Ampil) and Paula (Rachel Alejandro), women in their 40s who have remained unmarried, and their aging father Don Lorenzo "El Magnifico," a self-exiled artist. In an effortless blending of spoken and sung-through dialogue, the sisters and their longtime friend Bitoy Camacho (Sandino Martin), a young newspaper reporter, look back to their charmed childhood when their household hosted social gatherings for Manila's *alta sociedad*, the city's cultured set.

As if the very walls of the house could play back memories,
director Loy Arcenas delicately introduces dreamlike flashbacks of the gaiety of the Marasigans' soirees.



Menchu Lauchengco-Yulo as Pepang and Nonie Buencamino as Manolo (Culturtain Musical Productions Inc./Erickson Dela Cruz)

But if the walls could speak, they would also reveal the family's secrets and lies, which are compounded by the pervading honor-and-shame culture of the time. And no other object in the house symbolizes the family demons than Don Lorenzo's painting "*Retrato del Artista como Filipino*" — "Portrait of the Artist as Filipino."

Alas, the sisters have now fallen on hard times; neither is employed and save for that one strange painting, their father has not practiced his art for years. A steady stream of characters, all desperate to buy or sell the painting, would barrage the sisters, among them, their affluent siblings Pepang (Menchu Lauchengco-Yulo) and Manolo (Nonie Buencamino) who are threatening to cut financial support for the household; their godfather Don Perico (Robert Arevalo), a senator-cum-lapsed-poet;

and the boarder Tony Javier (Paulo Avelino), a fast and loose piano player.

Despite their growing anxiety over a mountain of unpaid bills, Candida and Paula stand firm on the noble principle that the painting, their father's gift to them, transcends its monetary value.

"The Portrait" offers a throwback image of Manila before she became the muse stricken with postwar stigmata. We are privileged to catch a glimpse of a unique Latin-Asian city, complete with an authentic re-enactment of the procession of Our Lady of La Naval, a venerated Catholic icon since the 17th century.

The handsome production design by Gino Gonzales is a virtual heritage restoration project, with meticulous attention to historical and aesthetic detail.

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The poetic libretto of Rolando Tinio, wedded with the stirring music of Ryan Cayabyab, offers a layer of storytelling that, while retaining a certain theatrical character, gracefully adapts to the cinematic material as well. The "double belonging," as seen in relatively recent Hollywood adaptions such as "The Phantom of the Opera" (directed by Joel Schumacher, 2004) and "Les Misérables" (directed by Tom Hooper, 2012), does not always work. "The Portrait" can be described as a blissful marriage; it works, and works beautifully.

Discounting the earnest but labored effort of non-singing actor Avelino, who is miscast as Tony Javier, the film boasts of an embarrassment of moving, self-assured performances.

The conniving siblings Pepang and Manolo, brought to life by stage veterans Lauchengco-Yulo and Buencamino, are the twisted yin and yang of selfishness and materialism, staking their claim to every chair and chandelier even while their father yet lives.

Arevalo's eyes are pools of melancholy that mirror the inner conflict of Don Perico, a man forever stuck in the purgatory of success and regret. Alejandro as the more demure sister Paula is memorably compelling in her own right.



Joanna Ampil plays Candida in "The Portrait." (Culturtain Musical Productions Inc./Erickson Dela Cruz)

But the heartiest applause is reserved for Ampil, who is brilliant in the lead role of Candida. A star of London's West End whose acting credits include "Miss Saigon" and "Cats," Ampil thoroughly lives in that acting-being threshold that only true actors triumphantly negotiate. The "Ampil effect" is an alchemy of charismatic presence, interior truth, emotional nuance, and of course, vocal mastery.

While weaned on theater, she has an uncanny grasp of the art of cinema. She understands that the camera works best at capturing subtleties. Her face becomes a canvas for broad and fine brushstrokes of emotion; her gestures, always organic and on-point.

To see 'The Portrait'

For updates on theater screenings and the video release of "The Portrait" in North America, visit anglarawan.com.

There is a riveting scene when Candida lets fly the truth, not in one explosive confession, but in a deft calibration of emotion that recalls a gathering tempest (effectively framed by Arcenas' punctuated use of extreme close-ups). Ampil's Candida will linger in my consciousness for years to come.

The artist's way of beauty and truth, the struggle for women's flourishing, the nobility of honoring one's forebears, the refusal to sacrifice values at the altar of Mammon — the universal themes of "The Portrait" are a wealth of inspiration set to sublime music.

"The Portrait" was an entry to the recent Metro Manila Film Festival, which has gained notoriety for favoring commercial movies bereft of artistic merit. Just when local theaters started to drop screenings for the film, "The Portrait" swept the major awards, including Best Film, and Best Actress for Ampil.

Shortly after, Manila's millennials quickly took to social media and rallied support for the film, occasioning a surge in theater screenings and audience turnout. In a reel-to-real turn, Aeneas bore Anchises on his back yet again.

May audiences everywhere do the same for this transcendent gem of global cinema.

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