

The intelligence of an actress-machine.

Interview with multi-talented Hazel Orencio,
star and right-hand of Filipino director Lav Diaz

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In his 1936 essay, Walter Benjamin contrasts stage actors with film actors: while the former performs for a live audience, the other performs for technology (the camera, microphones), before a group of specialists (the director, the cinematographer, the producer, etc.). "To perform in the glare of arc lamps while simultaneously meeting the demand of the microphone is a test performance of the highest order", he writes. "To accomplish it is to preserve one's humanity in the face of the apparatus." Having experienced both theatre stages and film sets during the last ten years, Hazel Orencio is certainly among the few film actors who conciliate liveness of theatre and technological demands. Starring Lav Diaz's long and extremely long takes, frequently resulting from one single shot, are where Orencio's performance meets live audiences during shooting – not only anonymous observers, but also spectators inside the film, in a kind of *tableau* recurrent in Diaz's work.

Born in 1986 in Antipolo, in the southern part of Luzon, Hazel Tapales Orencio studied Theatre at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines and has been acting in theatre and film since. In 2010, she met Lav Diaz for the first time. Diaz was not yet an award-winning film director and his worldwide reputation as the *auteur* of astonishing long films was only beginning. The young actress did not recognize Diaz when she went into an audition for *Prologue for the Great Desaparecido* (*Prologo sa ang dakilang desaparacido*, 2013), on the advice of one of her former theatre directors, and only afterward discovered that Diaz was present in the room during her audition. Orencio got the part and the film became, in a later version, the eight-hour long *A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery* (*Hele sa hiwagang hapis*, 2016), which premiered in Berlin.

The film tells the story of Filipino Independence, mostly through the eyes of Gregoria de Jesus—a major character in the

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history of the country. Married to Andrés Bonifacio, a revolutionary leader who was murdered and whose body was never found. Jesus spent a lot of time searching for the body – and for the truth. *A Lullaby* is arguably one of Diaz's films in which the long duration is not only justified but required to express the interminability of Jesus' quest. By its first screening, in 2016 Berlinale, Hazel Orencio's life had been totally changed.

Orencio was working intensely with the Filipino independent filmmaker, the leading figure of a group today known as "the new Golden Age"³. She had not only performed in a handful of important films, but had also become a sort of right-hand for Diaz. She had played the title-role in the five and a half-hour long *Florentina Hubaldo, CTE*⁴ (2012): with over 20-minute-long shots and long monologues filmed in one-take. Screened in the Locarno Film Festival, *From What Is Before (Mula sa kung ano ang noon, 2014)* was awarded a Boccacino de Oro, and Orencio received the best actress award from the critics association. In the group of fewer than ten people who usually work with Lav Diaz – they call it a "skeleton crew" – she alternates the positions of assistant director, production manager, casting director, production designer, costume designer...and does most of the subtitles for his films.

Orencio's capacity to perform multiple different tasks in the production process is mirrored in the versatile roles Lav Diaz asks her to play. Before she would eventually incarnate the widow of Andrés Bonifacio, in *A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery*, she played a victim of a religious cult with different shades of mental illnesses in *Century of Birthing (Siglo ng pagluluwal, 2011)* and as a brutally traumatized daughter in *Florentina Hubaldo, CTE*. Lav Diaz also envisioned her as a figure of care and protection: first as Ading, a nanny, in the supporting role she had in *Norte, The End of History (Norte, Hangganan ng Kasaysayan, 2013)* and as Itang, a young woman taking care of her disabled sister Joselina, played by Karenina Haniel, in *From What Is Before*, set in a remote barrio. In *Season of the Devil (Ang panahon ng halimaw, 2018)*, she reached the pinnacle of her multi-faceted abilities not only by singing (the film is an "opera rock"), but by taking on the role of the "tenyente", the torturer: a male soldier who follows the rules of a local disfigured despot who is terrifying the rural inhabitants of a small village during the Martial law.

Having been awarded for her acting performance, and having her work selected in the competition section in some of the most important festivals (Cannes, Locarno, Venice, Berlin), she lives

³ That was the name used in MoMA's program, in 2017: "A New Golden Age: Contemporary Philippine Cinema". Among the 17-film selection, there were Lav Diaz's *Norte, the End of History (Norte, hangganan ng kasaysayan, 2013)* and *From What is Before (Mula sa kung ano ang noon, 2014)*, both starring Hazel Orencio.

⁴ CTE stands for Chronic traumatic encephalopathy: a degenerative condition that causes memory loss and headaches that Florentina develops due to multiple abuses.

modestly in a country where culture, for better or for worse, is not among the main preoccupations in politics.

During this interview, which took place in different sections from February to April, her last film with Lav Diaz was being edited⁵. The conversation went through e-mail and Skype. Hazel Orencio talks about acting, Lav Diaz's method, and working in Rodrigo Duterte's Philippines⁶ – which can mean shooting in Malaysia and walking on the streets under disguise.

How did you become an actress and begin working with film?

HO – I was always acting ever since I was very active in oration contests when I was in grade school. For film study, in college, I did internships as a production assistant in independent films⁷. When I started working in theater after college, by 2007, in between theater seasons, I would still work as a production assistant for various films. I was a production assistant for three years.

How is the theater scene in Manila?

The theater scene in the Philippines is, sadly, not vibrant like in Europe. It is quite hard to be a theater actor here because we have very few theater groups and few people are interested in theater. When I started in theater, I was ready to bear the fact that I would not be paid much. Nevertheless, I thought I could simply work by myself. After a few years, nothing had changed and I had to leave theater.

Which kind of plays did you perform?

It was a combination of Filipino and English plays. I did Shakespeare plays. At that point I understood that I had a talent for remembering long texts like Shakespearean dialogues. I was able to do *Romeo and Juliette*, as an understudy of Juliet, because the director realized what I was able to memorize.

How did you meet Lav Diaz, and come to work together? Are *Elegy to the Visitor from the Revolution (Elehiya sa dumalaw mula sa himagsikan, 2011)* and *Century of Birthing* your first films with him?

⁵ *The Halt (Ang Hupa)* premiered at Cannes Festival, on May 2019.

⁶ Rodrigo Duterte is the 18th and current president of the Philippines since his election in 2016.

⁷ *Rekados* (2006) by Paolo Herras was one of them. In festivals where it was screened, the film was presented as a magic-realist tragicomedy about three generations of cooks in the slums.

My theater director Adriana Agcaoili⁸ recommended me to Lav, as Lav and his team were looking for an actress who would play Gregoria de Jesus for his film *The Great Desaparecido*, which later became *A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery*. The casting for *A Lullaby* was meant for her, but Lav thought she was a bit old for the role—and she was too busy anyway. The casting director then sent me a text message inviting me for a go-see. When I went to Lav's studio he didn't introduce himself as Lav Diaz, but as Rox Lee⁹, another Filipino film director. The casting director, Noel Miralles, gave me a copy of the script and asked me to study the lines, which I could read while we waited for Lav. Then, after a few minutes of waiting, he apologized and said the director wouldn't make it, so we should proceed with the reading. When I went home, I immediately looked for Lav Diaz on the internet, and how he looked, as I felt slighted when he didn't attend the audition. When I realized he had been at the audition the whole time, I was so embarrassed! But I did get the part eventually, although we ended up doing *Century of Birthing* and *Elegy to the Visitor from the Revolution* before, yes.

Was the transition between theater and cinema natural?

I didn't feel that I had to make a lot of adjustments. I still remember my first few scenes with Lav Diaz. I didn't know he was a one take director and I wasn't familiar with movie stages. One part of me really wanted to impress Lav by doing a lot of things. After the take Lav talked to me about how he knew what I used to do in theater, but in cinema, he said, that I had to limit myself and my movements. He said: "this is cinema, you only have limited space. Use your space and your time. You don't have to do a lot. Less is more." I remember that my movements were so wide...

Do you miss the feeling of an audience and the interaction between the stage and the public?

Yes, sometimes. I miss that, but I think that I get that feeling during premieres and festivals. People show appreciation. I get that feeling of confirmation during the credits as everyone claps and stands up.

It is also true that in many Lav Diaz scenes, while a character acts, there are always crowds watching the scenes...

During the shooting we sometimes have people watching. But here in the Philippines, as Lav is not very famous, when we shoot in the streets people don't really mind. There is a crowd when there is a

⁸ Adriana Agcaoili is a Filipino theatre director and actress in theatre and film. She worked in Raya Martin's *Now Showing* (2008) and *Independencia* (2009), among other works.

⁹ Roque Federizon Lee, mostly known as Rox Lee (1950), is a Filipino film director, painter and cartoonist. He is seen as a "godfather" for the young generation of Filipino independent filmmakers.

star with us, but a lot of times, since people don't mind, they don't even ask and disturb the shooting process. It is the advantage of making a film in the Philippines.

Long films, like *Century of Birthing* and *Florentina Hubaldo*, CTE are among your first experiences as an actress in film. How hard is it for an actress to work in such long films? Especially *Florentina Hubaldo*, because it has some long takes that include long walks in a river, or under the rain, and monologues in front of the camera. How did you prepare for them? We are especially interested in the end of the film: did you film it in order? Could you tell us how you worked? Is it true that you generally do only one take of each shot?

My training in theater helped me a lot, and I have always had talent with memorizing lengthy lines. For very emotional and lengthy scenes, like the monologue in *Florentina Hubaldo*, Lav gave me the script and asked how much time I would need before I would be ready to shoot it. For the monologue at the end of the film, I asked for two days. We shot *Florentina Hubaldo* in order, but for *Siglo* we shot the ending first. Yes, most of the time, we do one take of each shot, but sometimes it depends on the actors. If we feel like we want to do another take we are free to request it from Lav.

What about physical preparation? Is there any special training before or during the shooting?

The physical preparation really depends on the actor. For *The Season of the Devil* Lav Diaz specifically asked me to gain weight; to have a big stomach on screen. For this film [*The Halt / Ang Hupa*] I was the actress and the assistant director, so it was difficult to juggle the preparation.

Could you tell us what is it like to be a woman, and an actress, making a living doing film in the Philippines today?

It is hard to be an actress here, but mostly because I am the principled kind. I choose my projects very well, even if it means only getting one to two projects a year. I don't choose roles for the money.

In *Florentina Hubaldo*, CTE, *From What Is Before* or *A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery*, your characters go through a lot of pain and sorrow. There are long walks that never attain their goals and much sacrifice. From one film to the other it seems that the figure of a female "victim" of injustice is almost the same. In contrast, in *Season of the Devil*, you play the "Tenyente", the torturer, an incarnation of the evil – and a male character. How was that experience for you?

When Lav told me about the role I would play in *Season of the Devil* I said yes, thinking it would be easy. It was not. I always had doubts; Lav knew it. I had insecurities with my singing. But the thing is, all of us, even Lav himself, had doubts and insecurities, especially because this film is of a new form of genre. Together, we all collaborated and overpowered our insecurities!

What made the Tenyente role particularly hard is not the fact that it is a male role but that it is a mean role. The choices the character make are completely opposite from what I would do in real life. The rape scene was the most difficult for me because, when we shot it, it was not written in the script how Lav would execute it. So, he shot it the way it was in the film; my subordinates raping Lorena first and then me afterward. As soon as I exited the frame, when my subordinates took over, I was crying behind the camera, crying and shaking, thinking how bad my character was! When it was my turn to rape Lorena, Lav reprimanded me for crying and told me to be in character and to not judge the character. So, I did it the way I have always done when I act in Lav's films: be in the scene fully, like jumping off a cliff!

In the last ten years, Lav Diaz has cast popular Philippines actors for his films, such as John Lloyd Cruz in *A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery*, Charo Santos-Concio in *The Woman who left (Ang Babaeng Humayo, 2016)* or Angel Aquino in *Season of the Devil*. How did those actors adapt to Lav Diaz's method of shooting? How do famous actors interact with other actors of the crew?

They adapt to Lav's process! They don't get special treatment, like providing them with tents (we don't use shooting tents at all) but instead, Lav treats them like they are intelligent actors and that's what makes them keep saying yes when he offers them roles. Because they are happy being treated this way, because they are challenged to give their best in every take, since we mostly do one take, it comes naturally, for them, to treat the cast and crew like family, the way Lav does.

We have heard that Lav Diaz works all the time, rewriting the script at night after a day of shooting. Is it true? As an actress, how do you cope with those continuous changes? Do you have to learn the lines and then act on the spot? What room does Lav give you for improvisation? How much does he talk to you about what he envisioned for your character?

As I have previously mentioned, my training in theater helps me a lot. In general, we—theater actors who work with Lav—are very much delighted with the continuous changes because we always take it as a challenge. You don't get that kind of challenge on other film sets!

Actually, Lav adjusts to the different processes of actors. In my case, I try to know as little as possible. Lav briefly talks to me about my character, but he is not the type who will impose how he wants us to act. I memorize only my parts and don't read the lines of the co-actor I share the scene with. I want to know what to do during the scene, in physical and spatial terms, but that is it. Shaina Magdayao, for example, wants to know a lot about her character. John Lloyd Cruz has a lot of coffee sessions with Lav and then when he feels he has had enough, he decides to start shooting. Some of his actors don't want to talk about the characters. Joel Saracho needs the most important details and then he is okay. Lav Diaz said that a director's work often resembles the work of a psychologist, as he must deal with a lot of different people. I can see why.

In *A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery*, you play the historical character Gregoria de Jesus. How did you approach a character that had already existed, famously, in the Philippines? As Lav Diaz did for the film, did you also extensively research on the historical aspect of the “Mother of the revolution” to prepare for the role?

In 2010 Lav and I went to Maragondon, Cavite, where Andres Bonifacio was shot and where Gregoria searched for his body¹⁰. He also made me read books, especially *Katipunan and the Revolution* by Santiago Alvarez¹¹, but for authenticity's sake I only read it days before the shoot so the emotions would be fresh when I deliver it in the scenes.

Lav Diaz introduces traditional elements in each film. Do those different elements interfere in any way in your acting and how you envisioned your roles?

Some of Lav Diaz's crew didn't study in school. It becomes very educational for us actors. For example, we shot in the northern part of the Philippines and the conditions were very harsh: no electricity, no tracks for cars, no hot water. There was a kind of shock because we are used to the city. When Lav Diaz puts us in those environments with no electricity, with danger, with people trying to get money from us, it is easier to get in the skin of the characters. It makes our interpretations authentic.

¹⁰ Andres Bonifacio (1863-1897) was one of the leaders of the Filipino revolutionary movement known as "Katipunan", which sought the independence of the Philippines from the Spanish Crown. After the death of his first wife, Bonifacio married Gregoria de Jesus (1875-1943), who also had an important role in the independence movement. The circumstances of Bonifacio's death are still a subject of controversy. It is believed Bonifacio was the victim of a betrayal by another Katipunan member, Emilio Aguinaldo. There is also controversy regarding the mortal resting place of Bonifacio – bones believed to be his were found by 1918, but their authenticity was questioned and they disappeared afterwards.

¹¹ Santiago Alvarez, *The Katipunan and the Revolution: Memoirs of a General*. Manila: Ateneo de Manilla University Press, 1992.

About the traditional elements, if it is historical, we do research. At the same time, Lav is generous enough to explain what those elements mean before we shoot. He is very specific, down to the smallest details. In *From What is Before*, my character was picking leaves, and we took the time for Lav to teach me how to pick medicinal plants because I didn't know. He always searches for the detail. It is not only with me but also with the veteran actors. In *Evolution* [*Evolution of a Filipino Family, Ebolusyon ng isang pamilyang Pilipino*, 2004], the old actress¹² had to learn how to treat water buffalo and farm. That way, the actors know what they are doing and most importantly why.

Concerning the internal diversity of the Philippines: we would like to know where you were born and if you have kept your accent from film to film, or do you adapt it according to the character you interpret.

I was born in Antipolo where there is not much difference with other regions, although, in our region, we still use some old Tagalog words. So, since most of our films are in Tagalog, I adapt the way I speak to my character, like in *Florentina*: I had to speak like a child.

We were wondering about the many projects that Lav is working on currently. Is it difficult to manage and adjust all of those characters at the same time? Is it hard to overlap the different preparations of roles?

We do have projects that are finishing at the same time new ones are beginning in pre-production, but they don't really overlap. It really depends on Lav's flow. There is usually time to adjust. For example, we just finished a new film, we also have plans to finish another one, but it doesn't mean we will rush it. Lav always gives time to prepare. It is necessary because the characters that I play are very different: in one of the current projects I played an autistic character and in the one we just finished I played a soldier, and on another one I played the role an immigrant worker.

How do you organize your work from working on production, and assistant-directing, and acting?

It is easy with Lav's organic process; we follow with his flow. We base it on the script that he has written for the day (he writes the script every morning of the shoot). And with a skeletal crew comprised of 5-7 people, it's totally manageable.

¹² Hazel Orencio was referring to Angie Ferro, who played the role of Puring in the film.

The shooting for *Evolution* and *A Lullaby* took many years. Did that amount of time help in the learning process of your characters?

It is true that there is a lot of learning and adjusting during the shooting. I wasn't part of *Evolution* but I was part of *A Lullaby*. I saw it bloom from a project, a script, from finding funds, to pre-production. There are a lot of stories behind that. It is a long journey—a mental, physical and emotionally demanding journey. I feel all Lav's films are a journey. Even this one, we have just finished, was an exhausting journey, but it was worth it.

What are your current projects?

We wrapped our current shoot two weeks ago. It's a sci-fi film whose working title is *2034*¹³. We also have two unfinished projects: *Henrico's Farm* and *Because Man is a Beast*. For *2034* I am the production manager, the location manager, the casting director, and the actress. There are a lot of jobs, as always. It is still a skeleton crew with Lav Diaz writing, directing, editing, doing the cinematography, and he is also the production designer. We had to fire our previous production designer because she was overspending. Both of us juggle a lot of tasks.

Tell us a little bit about this film...

Last June, we were having a coffee with Lav's best friend, Larry Manda, also the cinematographer of *Norte*, and I brought up the topic of securing rights and copyrights for Lav's films and scripts. Larry said that he had a script that Lav wrote in the year 2000. Then that night Larry texted Lav, cursing and saying that Lav had to do the film as it was very "timely". There was, according to Larry, an urgency to make the script into a motion picture. We asked for the script and took a look. I read it first and the title was, then, *2019* and it was more or less a sequence treatment. I said to Lav to shoot the film because it echoed with the current political climate in the Philippines. Lav suddenly remembered the history of that script. It was written before he shot *Batang* [*West Side Avenue / Batang West Side*, 2001], in New York in 2000. One of the actors was supposed to produce it but it didn't push through. Lav totally forgot about it. He was inspired to do it now as it was timely and sci-fi. We contacted friends and people for funding. The production is by Spring Films, a local production by Piolo Pascual, lead actor in *A Lullaby*.

¹³ At the time of the interview, the film was given the title *2034*. It was the renamed *The Halt* (*Ang Hupa*) and was selected and the 60th Directors' Fortnight in Cannes (May 2019).

How many hours of rush do you have?

The raw material ... I forgot, Lav told me but I forgot exactly... seven or eight hours, if I remember correctly.

Which part do you play?

I play a female soldier. In the film there is a psychotic president, and I am the right-hand of that psychotic president. It is a crazy film, I can say that.

The violence of present times appears more evidently in *Season of the Devil* than in previous films, which are situated in past times. How was this choice? It is the most anti-government of Lav's films, isn't it?

Yes, and in fact, it is barely screened here in the Philippines anymore.

Do you consider leaving the country?

We haven't reached that point, but it is okay because Lav Diaz is living in New York. It is even more dangerous for us living in the Philippines all year. Art is not very important here, so we are less projected to political violence. For this last project, we feel safe because it is a sci-fi film set in 2034. It is under the pretense of sci-fi. We shot it in Manila without a permit. The film development council of the Philippines is trying to censor us. But they wouldn't stop Lav. A lot of people are trying to stop us and trying to pressure the actors into leaving the film. It is particularly close to our hearts because of the exhausting journey. He is editing right now, and he is apparently very happy about it. It is promising.