Is silent flick *Brides of Sulu* Pinoy or Kano?

CARMELO LAPEÑA, GMA NEWS August 27, 2011 7:26pm

The narrator has an American twang, but the speechless and drop-dead gorgeous actors are Filipino, and so is the tropical setting. The director has an American name, but it could have been an alias for a legendary Filipino director. So was it a Filipino or American production?

Nearly 80 years after it was made, the silent film *Brides of Sulu* is confounding film historians.

Southeast Asia's only silent film festival is on its fifth year in Manila, but this is the first time that the Philippines is represented through a film, whose production history is clothed in mystery.

Last Friday night, "Brides of Sulu" opened the 5th International Silent Film Festival at Shangri-la Mall. The film's main stars were 1930s matinee idols Adelina Moreno and Eduardo de Castro. It also featured other Filipino actors.

But the film is credited as an American production, presented by Exploration Corporation, directed by John Nelson, with a narrative by WM. K. Wells.

James J. Gilbert narrates the story, which is introduced in a foreword as a "simple love story based upon fact and the rites, rituals and ceremonies portraying the hatred of the Mohammedan Moro for the Unbeliever is not fiction. As an authentic document of Moro life, this production is designed to instruct as well as entertain."

At last night's screening, the film was scored by solo artist Armor Rapista, performed by the Panday Pandikal Cultural Troupe, a group of young Tausug artists based in Jolo.

"Through our (Tausug) music, we hope to bring back the Brides of Sulu to our home town," Rapista was quoted in an earlier report as saying.

For the last two decades, Brides of Sulu has been in circulation in the US film market. Apart from collectors and aficionados of early American B-movies, genre cinema and exploitation film fare, Filipino film archivists have been paying much attention to the film, whose authorship is in doubt.

Society of Filipino Archivists for Film (SOFIA) specialist Teddy Co said their research indicates Filipino origins, and that the film may have been "a marriage of two films."

Co refers to two late silent-era Filipino films made in 1931 - Jose Domingo Badilla's *Princess Tarhata* (Araw Movies) and Father of the Philippine Movie Industry Jose Nepomuceno's *The Moro Pirate* (Malayan Movies). Both films are about the Moros of Sulu, and Moreno is the lead actress in Tarhata while De Castro is the main actor in The Moro Pirate.

Brides of Sulu has two discernible separate parts – the dramatically acted scenes and the documentary portions. The dichotomy's purposes may be to entertain and to educate. But SOFIA believes this raises an intriguing possibility.

"Is BRIDES the mutant offspring of the re-cutting and reconstitution of two earlier local films via the editing room? Then dubbed in English and re-editorialized for US release with the intention of making it look like an American production so it would be easier to sell abroad?"
“And who is director John Nelson? Looking up imdb.com, he has apparently made only one film in his lifetime – BRIDES. And why are his initials the same as those of Jose Nepomuceno’s? So is the nationality of the film American or Filipino?”

SOFIA also points out that there is no spoken dialogue, only the American narration. Besides, no sound technician is given credit, increasing the likelihood that the Brides of Sulu may have originally been a Filipino silent film.

According to SOFIA, the Philippine movie industry produced around 75 silent films between 1912 to 1933.

“Sadly, all of the titles are deemed to be lost forever due to the absence of any film preservation efforts, up until the 1970s. The films were all made from highly combustible nitrate stock, and were believed to have been destroyed during fires, floods, and fighting during World War II,” says Co.

SOFIA describes Brides of Sulu as “providing a rare glimpse into a lost culture.” — ELR/LBG/HS, GMA News

Ref.: http://bit.ly/qC6VBs