Film History Comes to Life at LVN Museum

In difficult times such as what our country is facing now, it is comforting that there are still a few places where a Filipino can be proud of his patrimony. Yes, as the title says, we won’t be visiting a beach or a ruin. For a change, travel in the Philippines with a relaxed pace. Come with me to a different place of discovery: the museum.

Sprawling lot

Nestled on the sprawling lot of LVN studios on P. Tuazon blvd. in Quezon City is the LVN Museum. Once inside the compound, the visitor has to inform the people at the front desk at the administration building of his purpose, or he can call beforehand and have his name registered so the security guard can let him through. There is an entrance fee of P30.

The museum is still housed in a one-storey building, but don’t be fooled because there is nothing simple about the facade or the front lawn. Both are colorfully decorated with bayonets, shields, coat of arms and old lighting equipment. It’s a prelude to what a visitor can expect to see inside the museum: more than two decades of film legacy!

Before I went to the museum, I read up on the history of LVN from a masteral dissertation of a university professor. I learned that the studio was established in 1938, shortly before the Second World War. The acronym LVN was taken from the first letter of the last names of its partners: Doña Narcisa Buencamino de Leon, Carmen Villongco and Eleuterio Navoa Sr.

Facilities

It was closed down during the war and opened again after the Liberation until 1961, when it finally stopped producing movies. LVN Studios’ facilities were revitalized to cater to post-production needs of its clients.

The museum is packed with surprises. I call them that because from what I’ve learned from my edifying interview with its curator and founder, Bernard Fernandez, the pieces on display were salvaged from a neglected state in storage. A museum was never in the plan of LVN.

Fernandez said that the museum was created by a mere stroke of fate, with a little initiative from him. He recalled seeing boxes and boxes of old costumes and props stacked in a bodega more than 10 years ago. Then in 1989, he had a vacant lot—where old and rotting cars were piled up—levelled down and a sort of open structure was erected. He employed a hired hand and moved the salvaged boxes to that site.

Permanent display

It was during museum curator Bernard Fernandez’ birthday celebration that the idea of a permanent display was conceived. He was talking to the De Leons, and they recognized his effort and ordered the release of some money to begin the construction of a building to house the old costumes and props.
Having worked in the wardrobe department of LVN Studios since 1950, Fernandez has preserved the costumes quite remarkably. The colors are still bright, the lines distinct and the designs accurate. It’s a shame though that only a few are modeled by mannequins, such as costumes worn by Nida, Delia, Charito Solis and Manuel Conde.

Not equipped with modern means of preserving fabrics, Fernandez opts for naphthalene or mothballs, with an occasional sunning to dry out residual moisture and the fungi growth that accumulates. The air-conditioning helps to stabilize the temperature, the fluctuation of which can easily ruin delicate fabrics.

Photographs

Aside from the costumes ranging from flamboyant evening gowns and ornate armored suits, the museum also boasts of photographs of the studio’s stars, like Mila del Sol and Lou Salvador Jr., which line the walls. More photographs of directors and those showcasing scenes from movies fill up the nooks and crannies of the place, along with a few old movie posters and props like cameras.

Fernandez also showed me the old Max Factor makeup kits which include a formula they used for fake blood which was more realistic than what makeup artists use today. There are also worn-out shoes and boots and rusty military insignias. Encased in a glass cabinet is Charito Solis’ elaborate jewelry which she used in her movies. They were personally delivered by Charito’s sister after the actress’ death.

But it’s not only Charito Solis who gave pieces for display at the museum. Nida Blanca and Delia Razon also donated some of their dresses and photographs, though both women prefer to keep their own collections, perhaps for sentimental reasons. In fact, Nida has boxes of costumes and albums of photographs in her library.

Portrait

Museum curator Bernard Fernandez said that there are other potential acquisitions, but so far none has materialized yet. One is the life-size portrait of Leopoldo Salcedo done by an American painter. The painter was looking for an individual or an institution as the recipient, and the LVN Museum was one of those considered. But the plan was foiled by Salcedo’s death. Fernandez last saw the portrait at the star’s wake and didn’t dare ask for it, out of respect for the grieving family.

Another batch was made up of trunks of old stuff belonging to Rogelio de la Rosa, as promised by his wife. Unfortunately, Fernandez lost contact with her. Still another possible acquisition is the suitcase full of scripts currently in the possession of someone who worked as assistant director for actor-turned-director Gregorio Fernandez.

Small place

With all these great movie memorabilia in exhibit in LVN Museum, one can only marvel how such a small place can hold so many pieces. Bernard Fernandez, the museum curator, reveals that there are still more articles he wants to display but can’t due to lack of space. The need for a larger venue has been his main concern for sometime now. People who have visited the museum—film students, movie buffs, workshoppers and tourists—have expressed hope for a bigger place for such a unique
museum. Fernandez says they should act fast, because at the age of 80, he is not getting any younger or stronger!

But in spite of the growing popularity and media coverage the museum has been enjoying, it has yet to be officially recognized by authorities. So far, as Fernandez said, the closest working relationship they have had with the National Commission for Culture and the Arts was when the NCCA borrowed Nida’s costumes for an exhibit.

The museum is also not yet featured in tourism brochures but the coverages of TV shows like “Balitang K,” “Cityline,” “Extra, Extra,” “Knowledge Power” and “Wake-up Call” make better advertisements as these reach more people.

Video documentation

In return for the interviews, Fernandez asked for copies of the tapes for video documentation, which can prove valuable in the future.

To prove the museum’s gradual introduction to mainstream popular culture, Fernandez recalls that a multinational food and beverage company attempted to borrow numerous pieces they planned to exhibit at the Glorietta. He declined when he saw the long list of pieces to be borrowed. He was even more adamant when he learned that the pieces would be out of their home for a year. The obvious care Fernandez devotes to the pieces is understandable, considering that any damage done is irreparable as they are all original and have become priceless in their own right. He also admits that one of his driving forces in maintaining the integrity of the museum is his gratitude to Doña Sisang for taking him as her ward. He reminds me that last Oct. 29, they celebrated the 123rd birth anniversary of the LVN matriarch. Indeed, there can be no other greater gift than to preserve her legacy.

National treasure

It is not difficult to see that the LVN Museum has the potential of becoming a national treasure we could be proud of. As such, it needs the care and help of all concerned Filipinos, if we want it to be carried over to the future.


Look more on www.FilmArt.PhilippinesHeritage.ph