

Review: Heneral Luna

by Sandra Bomediano

Film critics may argue how today's mainstream industry only seem focused on pandering audiences with popular love-teams, zany comedies, recycled plots, and the latest adultery drama - sometimes (if not most of the time) slapping a popular song as a title to go with it. Perhaps it is our inclination to play it safe. What works with one movie will surely work with another – and nine out of ten usually do. With such easy success, moviemakers almost seem afraid to break out of their comfort zones.

Heneral Luna happily moves away from the mainstream. Not only is it an indie film, it is also a historical one at that. A film that is undoubtedly a big risk. A big risk that pays off. Initially slated for very short screenings in theaters (to give way to Hollywood blockbusters), public clamor and online protests have prodded cinemas to give *Heneral Luna* an extension. It has garnered praise from both critics and viewers as a triumphant masterpiece. The film has also been chosen as the official Philippine selection for the Best Foreign Language Film category of the 2016 Academy Awards (Oscars).

So what is it about Jerold Tarog's film that seems to resonate with audiences? What makes *Heneral Luna* stand out from other previous historical biopics? All the answers lie in the film itself.

Heneral Luna succeeds in a lot of areas without skimping on quality or relying on popular actors to garner publicity. The cinematography is stunning and the rarely-done period backdrop of a young Philippines is a character of her own. Complemented with a score that is subtle, haunting, and powerful, the scenes are both evocative and provocative. The special effects are not jarring, but play like a natural element in the story. Perhaps the only gripe is this: some animated sequences as well as a couple of awkward transitions could have been executed better. But as a whole the film has heart, its characters the very beat that makes the plot throb with life.

Antonio Luna's character is the fiery general with a vision – a Philippines liberated from the enemy. But it is not the Americans that pose the biggest threat. Regionalism, self-interest, and divided loyalties create the downfall for not only one man but for the entire country. John Arcilla's portrayal of Luna, together with the rest of the cast, is human – flawed, engaging, and relatable. In fact, there is no attempt to portray any of the prominent

historical figures free of flaws or to make them absolute paragons of nationalistic idealism. They are as they were in the past: of flesh and blood.

This film provokes issues regarding our past, such as the questionable motivations of our leaders and the swept-under-the-rug political agenda. It has also led to an ardent discussion on the concepts of patriotism and nationhood, sparked a renewed interest in the somewhat tragic past of our country, and raised uncomfortable questions about our leaders and ourselves.

Tarog's film proves that historical film *can* be made and *can* be successful. It is especially timely considering we are near the cusp of electing our country's new leaders. Just like in the country's Revolution, our downfall or victory is in our hands. Do we charge for change like Luna in the battlefield? Do we sit in a table and argue among ourselves? Or are we all Joven, watching the flag of our potentials burn to ashes?

Sadly, history is too easily forgotten. The film reminds us that history has lessons we could learn from, it cautions us from repeating mistakes made in the past. We only need to take a look at our country today to realize that history has never left us.