

4 Nepomuceno Makes Documentaries

Every successful man can pinpoint the place where he first learned the tricks of the trade that started him off toward the top.

Jose Nepomuceno learned the rudiments of the photoplay business at this old Parhelio photo studio on Plaza Goiti. But his love for show business actually dates back to his childhood.

A flashback now takes us back to Regidor Street in Quiapo (now Quezon Boulevard), site of the Nepomuceno residence which was located near Quiapo Church. Beside the church was a theater exhibiting Spanish zarzuelas. The young Nepomuceno used to frequent the theater during rehearsals and exhibitions. At the age of four, he would cut paper figures which he would utilize in his own "shadow dramas."

The drama of the theater colored young Pepe's dreams: would he, someday, be able to act in, or present, such zarzuelas? There was something in the way the thespians tried to reenact a slice of life that tugged at Pepe's heartstrings.

Years later, when he was making his first movie, he noticed that the exaggerated movements of the zarzuela players should not be duplicated before the cameras which had a way of magnifying every gesture, even every flick of the eyelash. He was to learn, by trial and error, that acting before the cameras is more effective if underplayed; that any unnecessary gesture or movement would result in overacting.

The same theater (first called Oriente, later Cine It) which showed zarzuelas later exhibited European films, through the efforts of a certain Mr. Rebarber, a Frenchman. During that period, French films were very popular since the Americans were just beginning to produce moving pictures. In fact, the European photoplays in the early 1900s were better than the Hollywood flickers.

The young Nepomuceno used to play hooky from school just to see those early flickers. He discovered that the photoplay had even bigger possibilities than the zarzuela. In later years, when Nepomuceno was cranking out his own photoplays, familiar faces and voices came to him across the corridors of time: the voices were

those of the zarzuela players, the faces were the blurred visages he had seen years before on a silver screen.

The first public movie exhibitions in Manila were limited to single showings (i.e., the theater was emptied after each exhibition to enable others to see the movie). But after some time, the exhibition of pictures became continuous and the spectators could stay as long as they wanted to inside the theater.

At that time, too, kinetoscopes began to proliferate in Manila. They were also known as nickelodeons because you dropped ten centavos into a slot, looked into an aperture, and ground a crank.

There were other peep shows: the Vitascope, the Bioscope, and the Cinematographe. But the most popular were the nickelodeons. They were installed in poolrooms, in the lobbies of theaters, and hotels, and even in fairs and carnivals.

In America, Thomas Alva Edison and his eight associates formed the General Film and the Motion Picture Patents companies. At first, Edison did not care about the profits from his invention. But by 1907, according to *The Movies* of Arthur Mayer and Richard Griffith, the gross income from film production exceeded that of the legitimate theater and vaudeville combined.

White Magic—as the movies were known in these days—was not only good entertainment; it was also a profitable business.

When Edison and his associates had formed a monopoly, which exacted licenses from every moviemaker, the independents began to object. They found champions in Carl Laemmle and William Fox and filed suit to break the monopoly. In 1915, the US Supreme Court decided to abolish General Film and with it the strangle-hold of Edison and Company on the movie business was broken.

When movies were young, they were produced in the same way stage plays were presented. Each began with the entrance of the actors and lasted unbroken until their exit. The players' actions were exaggerated, there were no close-ups nor fade-outs.

This was why, at the start of the movies, the critics were skeptical about its possibilities. What finally saved the photoplay was the introduction of narrative.

There were many who pioneered in the art of the narrative film. It was a journeyman actor in America by the name of David Wark Griffith who pioneered in such things as the close-up and the long shot and the fade-out.

In France, a professional magician named Georges Melies combined his magic tricks with pantomimed stories. Among his early narrative films were: *Cinderella*, 1900; *Red Riding Hood*, 1901; *Bluebeard*, 1901; and *A Trip to the Moon*, 1902.

One year later, in 1903, Edwin S. Porter produced and directed *The Great Train Robbery*. This was the picture that revolutionized story-telling in the movies. Among other things, *The Great Train Robbery* established the single reel (between eight to twelve minutes of film) as the standard length for movies; it set the fashion and the pattern for Western films; and inspired other directors to explore the implications of the disjunctive style of editing and the free juggling of time and space.

By the time Griffith introduced his *The Birth of a Nation* on March 3, 1915, at the Liberty Theater in New York, the movies had outdistanced the theater and the vaudeville.

Back to the young Nepomuceno and the theater beside Quiapo Church.

Nepomuceno was always the first to enter the Quiapo Theater at every change of program. More and more he became fascinated with moving pictures and in

1917 he finally decided to risk everything in this new form of entertainment.

To raise capital, he sold his lucrative studio on Plaza Goiti and started buying equipment from every foreigner who came here with movie gadgets. He ordered books and magazines about the movie industry and read them avidly. First he acquired a Bive movie camera and then bought a Pathe, a French-made camera.

With deliberate care, like a scene in slow motion, he started producing documentaries.

The first documentary he made was the funeral of the first wife of Sergio Osmeña, Sr., in Cebu. He was an accredited correspondent of Pathe and Paramount News of Hollywood and was able, therefore, to have his documentary films or newsreels shown abroad.

In those days, the Philippines had for ambassador of goodwill a diminutive man who had for portfolios two deadly fists that acted as trip hammers to win for himself the flyweight championship of the world. The victory of Pancho Villa was a world event that shook the world of boxing. The enterprising Nepomuceno, his nostrils ever aquiver for fresh news, took pictures of Pancho's wife in Manila. The newsreel was shown in every country where Paramount Pictures were being shown.

During the terrible earthquake in Japan, Nepomuceno received a cable from Paramount News. He was instructed to go to Tokyo to cover the catastrophe. This was a signal honor for the Philippines since Paramount also had an accredited correspondent in Hong Kong which was nearer Japan. He was able to dramatize on film the earthquake and was given a bonus for his efforts.

Through his contracts in the Bureau of Commerce, Nepomuceno was able to film different industries such as tobacco-raising, coconut-planting, buntal hat-making, copra production, button-making, and the like.

Nepomuceno was also the first to produce cinema commercials when he incorporated with the Administration Technical Industrial Cinematografica on August 20, 1940. A quick dissolve to 1967. Today, his youngest son, Luis, is the head of FAME, Inc., the biggest firm dealing in movie commercials.

The *Administracion Technica Industrial Cinematografica* (ATIC) was also formed to give service and guidance to people interested in producing moving pictures. Among those who made use of ATIC facilities were: Vicente Salumbides, of whom there will be more later, Julian Manansala, Leyba Huas, Caridad Maffeil, and many others who were to produce their own movies afterward.

It was in May 15, 1917, when Nepomuceno purchased his first movie cameras from Yearsley and Gross. For two years, he experimented with documentaries and newsreels before making his first full-length feature film. He also made subtitles in Spanish and English which he inserted in imported French and Italian photoplays.

One of Nepomuceno's ideas was to raise funds by adding ten centavos to the residence tax. This was to be used by the government for the installation of a projector in every municipality. His intention was to project industrial films so that the people would be educated. However, the plan did not materialize.

At long last, after two years of expensive experimentation and training in the art of taking moving pictures, Nepomuceno produced his first full-length movie: *Dalagang Bukid*. This was in 1919.

Exit Jose Nepomuceno, studio photographer, newsreel cameraman, and documentary maker.

Enter Jose Nepomuceno, movie maker.