

Diaz-Abaya Talks about the Philippines “What I want to tell—People and their Society”

Marilou DIAZ-ABAYA

SATO TADAO: Since I have been involved in the Focus on Asia–Fukuoka International Film Festival, I'm overjoyed that film director Ms. Marilou Diaz-Abaya from the Philippines is a laureate of the Fukuoka Asian Culture Prizes. Her films have been shown at this festival every year and have become very popular. Those films have gone from Asia to Europe, and now are shown all over the world.

When I started studying Asian films 25-26 years ago, I thought films from the Philippines were rather unusual. Asian films have a certain kind of Asian feel to them in that they are slow-paced, morose, with lingering imagery, but Philippine films have a touch of American movies. They're fast-paced, the characters are extremely active and the emotions are more intense than American movies. Portrayals of sex and violence were also extreme enough to make me think the films would be difficult to present in Japan.

Amid this, coming across the films of Ms. Diaz-Abaya was, for me, a great joy. Many of her films depict the Philippines' reality, issues such as poverty, child labor, people leaving their homes to find work, and in this the films contain a strong social criticism. However, she by no means depicts the characters as simply good guys and bad guys. Characters that should be denied in the society are described in an extremely fascinating way as humans, and society as a whole and man himself are really richly depicted. Exactly this kind of film is necessary for Asia. I feel proud that I have continuously been able to introduce Ms. Diaz-Abaya's work.

First of all, centering on her own films, I'd

like to ask Ms. Marilou Diaz-Abaya to talk about the reality in the Philippines and her thoughts as a Filipino.

MARILOU DIAZ-ABAYA: I'm very pleased to be back in Fukuoka, to this city of very warm people. Fukuoka is very distinct and very special to me because the people here are closer in many ways to Philippine characteristics, I think. For one, Fukuoka people smile much faster. Secondly, you walk slower. Thirdly, you don't look at your watch too often and the *ramen* is the best in all of Japan.

I was educated in the Philippines where English was the language of instruction, where English was the mother tongue in my family. I took advanced studies in Los Angeles and London. With this background, obviously there was a lot of Western, in particular American, influence on my educational background. After going to film school, as I returned back to my country, I realized that I had all the skills of making films but didn't have stories to tell because I didn't know my people and the stories that I thought I could tell. Nobody else was really interested in because I was isolated. Only 10-15% of the Filipino population are educated and have the means to go to higher education and I felt very alienated from my own native culture.

My own educational and personal circumstances kind of reflect the historical experience of my own country. In prehistoric times, my country, which is an archipelago of more than 7,100 islands, were trading islands. Indians, Malays, Indonesians, Chinese and some Japanese were frequenting the islands in transit as traders, so it was kind of like a very big mall

※The text on this and the following pages summarizes the seminar between Ms. Marilou Diaz-Abaya, the Arts and Culture Prize laureate and Professor Shimizu Hiromu (Graduate School of Social and Cultural Studies, Kyushu University) that was moderated by Mr. Sato Tadao (film critic).

made up of trading islands where more than 88 dialects were spoken. So, we had no concept of our nation or a nation state and we didn't have one single, distinct unifying culture but rather a very casual and informal mosaic of multi-cultures and multi-dialects.

In the 16th century, the Philippines was colonized by Spain, which brought Roman Catholic friars and soldiers. They, instead of teaching us Spanish, forbade us from learning Spanish. The friars learned to speak and to write in our various dialects and this way, they taught us the Roman Catholic religion, which continues to prevail and dominate our culture even today. So if I can consider one cultural instrument that first unified the Filipino as a nation with a sense of what makes us one family, I would say that would be religion, specifically the Roman Catholic religion, which was propagated by the Spaniards for more than 300 years. A lot of emphasis was put on biblical themes, especially the Passion of Christ, the suffering, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Ten Commandments, as we call them, the necessity of suffering on Earth in order to earn a place, eternal place in Heaven. These are the themes that continue to dominate our sensibilities and our value system even today and these are the same themes that new generations are challenging today.

As a result of the Spanish-American war in the late 19th century, Hollywood took over the Philippines. When the American colonizers arrived, one of the first things they did was to teach all Filipinos how to speak English and so from the instrument of religion followed the instrument of language. In my own family, my father comes from the Ilocos province in the north, my mother comes from Bulacan in the middle Philippines and they didn't understand each other's dialects so they courted each other in English and they raised their children by using English. With English as a unifying factor among all the people in the 7,100 or so islands we learned the mechanics of democracy. As a

matter of fact our school system, our constitution are all virtually Xerox copies of the American constitution and the American educational system.

From the pre-Hispanic animism with influences from Buddhism and Islam which was introduced by Arab missionaries to the Philippines in the 14th and 15th centuries, you can imagine the swing in our historical experience and memory from being basically an Asian-based culture system with influences not only from Asia but also from Arabia, to the Western-Spanish colonial era, which was very religious in theme, and then another extreme swing to the concept of democracy and capitalism under the American regime. With such extreme shifts in influences it's quite a trial to figure out where the Philippine really is in all of this and what remains of his culture. In the 60's especially, 20 years after the war, we felt like a very fragmented nation; too many influences, too many cultures, most of them contradicting each other between spirituality and suffering and sacrifice, and democracy, liberalism, capitalism and prosperity on another side. And to the contemporary generation belongs the challenge of recognizing all the fragments of our history and cultural identity, the contradictions in these fragments and trying to make sense, put the pieces back together and maybe reinvent ourselves.

As a filmmaker, one of the first things I did when I returned to the Philippines to start making films was to stop speaking in English. I started to read newspapers and comics in Filipino. I listened to only Filipino-language radio, watched TV in Filipino-language, watched films in the cinema houses where the great masses of audiences watched them. And I continue to do that today which is why I always look for films that will take me away from the constrictions and the contradictions of my own middle-class to discover the unities and harmonies and the simplicities of people who come from other classes.

Recently, I've been very fortunate to have the opportunity, for example, to go back and look very closely at my country's history in preparation and in the production of my film "Jose Rizal." And by preparing for the film, researching for it and directing it, I felt satisfied at the end of the production that I could finally reconcile what the Spaniards gave us as legacy with what we hold dear today as democratic ideals.

When I made the film "Muro-Ami," I had an excuse to go to the Visayas, which is also a very depressed group of islands in the Philippines, and I had a chance to work with non-actors, real fisherman and children, who are among the poorest of the poor. With the legitimate excuse of making a film, I found the real reason that I wanted to do the film and that was because I had a chance to live with the children and their parents and the fishermen and the divers. I was very enriched by the film but more than that, by the experience of researching and immersing for it. And that is to say, I found that the poorer the people that I worked with were, the more gracious they were, the simpler their lives were, the greater their peace of mind was, it seemed to me. And I wanted to discover why and if I could also live that way with less materially but with more spiritually. This is a lesson that I shall always be grateful to the muro-ami divers for teaching me.

I have a chance to work with Muslim-Filipinos in Mindanao for my latest film and my subject is the war which was declared by Joseph Estrada in the year 2000. Of course this is just the latest of a series of wars between Muslims and Christian-Filipinos, which have been raging for six hundred years or more. During the colonial regimes of the Spaniards and the Americans and even after the liberation, the Muslim-Filipinos in Mindano, the southernmost island of the Philippines, have always considered themselves a sovereign and separate nation because of their distinct religion, which is Islam, and because of their distinct culture, separate

from the rest of the Christian-Filipino culture. And they have continued their "jihad" or their struggle to remain free, to self-determine their destiny in the way that Islam prescribes. The war was escalated during Joseph Estrada's regime and hostilities became very costly, in terms of human lives, specifically children's lives, both Christians and Muslims. When I was asked if I would be interested to do the movie, I didn't think twice, I said "yes." Then I realized I didn't know the first thing about Islam. I never paid attention to the history of the Mindanao people. I'm very weak in Arabian literature so I'm practically ignorant and yet, unlike most Christian-Filipinos, I was not afraid of Muslims. I had no prejudices really for the simple reason that here in Fukuoka I was introduced to my first friends and to my first films from Iran and Egypt. Before I watched Iran cinema, I only saw images from CNN of Iranian and Iraqi soldiers heavily armed and shooting at each other and bodies, bodies and more bodies and that's all I knew. Through cinema I learned what their homes look like, what kind of food they ate, they worry about marriage, security, education, and the same things we do. So for the last two years I've been in Islamic studies.

Now I realize how powerful cinema really is. It's not only a very powerful medium of entertainment. It could be so much more powerful to become part of the vocabulary of the peace process, not only in the Philippines but I think worldwide. If more fundamentalist Muslims watched American films and if more Americans watched films made by Muslims, I'd like to think that maybe the two towers would still be standing up today.

Perhaps we didn't use all the cultural tools available to us to have a more meaningful exchange and dialogue between and among peoples and cultures. That civilization in the 21st century is in danger of collapsing. Now, in the Philippines, there is a cease-fire between the government-armed forces and the Muslim Islamic Liberation Front guerillas. I think that

my film, which is about to be completed, will be a very good supplement if the peace talks are successful. Even if the peace talks fail, my film will be important to help recover an atmosphere of dialogue between Christians and Muslims in my country.

On the day I arrived in Fukuoka, I turned on the television and the first thing I saw was the Twin Towers, one of them burning. It unraveled and immediately, as expected, the names of Osama Bin Laden and some sympathizers like Afghanistan were mentioned. Then I realized I was not going to be able to forget the Muslim-Christian problem even I was in Fukuoka.

And it is here in Fukuoka where every year I can always rely on the encouragement and the inspiration and the support, not only of the people from Fukuoka, my host, for their generosity and hospitality, but also the kind of support and solidarity that I can always look forward to among my other Asian filmmakers. For me, this city is not only a very important harbor for commerce but also, more importantly, a sanctuary for culture and the arts.

The Japanese occupied the Philippines for three years during the war before the Americans liberated us in 1946 but it was during the three years of the Japanese occupation when the Filipinos were, for the first time in their history, encouraged to speak in Filipino, not in English and not in Spanish. So our own, stage plays, theater, and songs in Filipino were created and the most memorable cherished Filipino songs and literature were made during the Japanese occupation.

Today is another time and another context, but the concept of our preserving what is best in the Asian spirit still has much value if we are to survive what looks to be now a very dangerous 21st century. Consider nothing of the technology and state-of-the-art anti-missile systems in the United States could prevent the human will and the human body of those pilots from ramming themselves against those two buildings. We can invent the latest and the most advanced

technology but we still can't do anything to really control human thought or the human spirit. I think this value, the very core of humanity, is precisely the service of culture. In an age of advanced technology and globalization, the best contribution that we Asians can make to the global village is the Asian heritage. The final objective of globalization is not that all men and nations can be alike but rather that different men of different nations can live together in co-existence and in peace.

I read Professor Shimizu's book of anthropological research on Aytas living in Mt. Pinatubo area. At first, I wondered what the use of the study of Aytas is in a way like Ainu people in Japan that has a population of only several ten thousands. What is the use of that for Japan? Or what is the use of that for the Philippines? But I realized not only the data but the spirit of the people is worth recording. Then they should be remembered especially if and when they become endangered and extinct by the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo.

I discovered that it was in the poorest regions of the Philippines where I found the most peace and grace. I hope that I should be given a few more opportunities to try to evoke this experience of the richness of simplicity in my films.

There would be as many Philippine stories as there are Philippine islands. So, it looks like there's a lot of work that can still be done by Filipino film directors if only there would be an increase in the audiences for Philippine films and for Asian cinema. At this point I'd really like to say how appreciative I am of how Fukuoka celebrates the best of Asian culture and the arts every year in September. In particular the Focus on Asia Fukuoka International Film Festival gives you a chance to see how richly diverse neighboring cultures and nations can be.

Many people will tell you that cinema is a dying industry, but I always remind them to reconsider their choice of cinema. I am also a television director but I tell my fiction stories on

the big screen. Because I think that there is a very special commitment established between the filmmaker and his audience inside the cinema. There's something very committed and special about that experience, different from television we watch with casual, non-committal attitude, and with the remote. It's just a quick shift of the button if we don't like the program. In this point, television is like a live-in, while cinema is like a marriage. In film you sign the marriage contract because you pay. There's something very committed and special, and therefore it is very memorable to go to the cinema. And if the audience could give it another chance, the filmmakers could also resolve to make more special films that other media fail to do. It's not only an experience in watching entertainment, it's an experience of community. Unlike television and Internet, cinema has something special about the social gathering and there's a community that is created inside the cinema house.

SATO: The film dealing with the problem between Catholics and Muslims mentioned by Ms. Diaz-Abaya was scheduled to open this year's Focus on Asia 2001 - Fukuoka International Film Festival. However, one more day of filming was needed before completion, so we gave up for this year and decided to screen it next year. Coincidentally, the opening film of this year's film festival is the Iranian film "Baran" by director Majid Majidi. It deals with the discrimination experienced by Afghan refugees in Iran. No matter which of the two films is screened, their subject matter fits perfectly with the recent incident in New York. When one stops to think of the global situation, I think that such works come together naturally.

DIAZ-ABAYA: (slide presentation of films)

(1) "Sa Pusod Ng Dagat (In the Navel of the Sea)"

[Pepito, the Main Character] This is a small

village in the 1950's in the Philippines. Pepito's mother, Rosa, is the only midwife in the whole little village. In the Philippines the tradition is for midwives to teach their daughters to pass on their trade of midwife, but in this case she had an only child, a boy. So it is he who must learn the trade of his mother. As a young boy he doesn't mind it. As he grows up into a teenager, however, naturally he becomes very self-conscious that it is not very macho to deliver babies. This film looks at the growing pains and maturity of a young, provincial boy. It also looks at the relationship between mother and son and how the roles between men and women can actually be reversed.

[Rosa, the Mother] Rosa is a widow, but has an affair and becomes pregnant. She is now very much afraid of the scandal that it will cause to her community. The irony of which is, she delivers the babies of other women but wants to abort her own which is a big problem because the Roman Catholic religion forbids abortion.

[The Penance of the Crucifixion] And here we see what is considered by the West as a very bizarre practice in the Philippines. Every Lenten season, there are still many Filipinos who imitate the suffering of Jesus Christ, the carrying of the Cross and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. They actually have nails driven through their hands to suffer like Jesus Christ as a kind of penance for their sins and the sins of their family. This scene shows how that is still practiced. By the way, the person who has himself crucified like Jesus Christ is the lover of Rosa and it is for the penance for committing the sin of adultery that he is having himself crucified. And the town watches.

[Delivering his First Baby] Here Pepito delivers the first baby as an adult, he's finally able to do it on his own and so it's a very moving, powerful moment between mother and son that they brought a new life.

[Mourning the Death of Rosa Who Threw Herself in the Sea] Rosa, the mother drowned herself because she was very guilty about being pregnant, an unmarried mother. She was afraid of bringing shame to her son so she drowned herself and it is for this reason and in her memory that they gather for a religious ritual of prayers and throwing flowers into the sea.

(2) "Jose Rizal"

[Jose Rizal, the Main Character] Jose Rizal is a Philippine national hero. He was a physician, a poet, a painter, a novelist, and an engineer. He was also a scientist and a linguist, and he spoke twenty-two languages including Japanese. If he had twenty-two languages he might have had about double that the number of girlfriends including a Japanese from Yokohama. There is a beautiful bust of Jose Rizal at Hibiya Park in Tokyo donated by the Rizal Society of Japan. He was an inspiration to Gandhi. He wrote two very controversial novels denouncing the abuses of Spanish friars and the government, and for this he was executed by firing squad for treason.

[The Spanish Lawyer] Taviel de Andrade, Jose Rizal's Spaniard lawyer who, in the beginning, doubted the integrity of Rizal but ended up becoming a great admirer and a friend of the Filipino hero.

[The Trial Scene] Here we see Jose Rizal being tried by the Spaniards in Spanish. You can see that his arms are tied as a sign of his captivity. It was a very famous trial and there were complete transcripts of it. So we could reconstruct very easily. He was found guilty of treason and subversion, sentenced to death by firing squad at the age of thirty-three.

[Characters from Rizal's Novels] The movie really looks at Jose Rizal as being tried by society, tried in court by the Spaniards but also tried by the characters. In other words, as an artist he begins to doubt the worthiness of his

works. So he imagines the characters that he wrote coming to visit him on the eve of his death to question his honesty, to question his integrity, and to question his readiness to sacrifice his life for country.

[The Execution Scene] This is a portion of the execution, which actually happened near Manila Bay. However, of course the scene could not be shot there anymore. So we found a place north of Manila facing the sea where there was all sand and no grass. So we brought six trucks of green grass to transport on top of the sand. One day we realized that the grass would turn brown. So, the production design crew brought another truck of green paint and we painted the grass green at 2 a.m. If you asked all of those soldiers, including Montanor, to show you the soles of their shoes, they would all be green.

[The Moment before Death] But levity aside, this is the moment before he dies. The eight musketry soldiers in front, in beige, are Filipinos serving in the Spanish army. They are to aim at Rizal and shoot him. And should any one of these eight Filipinos hesitate to shoot Jose Rizal, there are eight Spanish soldiers behind them to shoot the Filipino soldier.

[The Moment of Death] Jose Rizal requested to face the firing squad, but the request was not granted. Being a gymnast, a fencer, a very good swordsman, a boxer, and judo wrestler, he had a very good sense. So he calculated just how far his feet should be apart from each other to fall on his back. He also requested that his head be spared, because he calculated that if they would shoot him in the back, he would turn his head upwards to the sky so that the momentum would carry the rest of the body to make him die facing the sky and not downwards. His request was granted and the body turned as he calculated.

(3) "Muro-Ami (Reef Hunters)"

[A Muro-Ami Fishing Boat] This is a boat that

carries three hundred to four hundred children and teenagers and a few adults. They dive underwater carrying stones on ropes and they crush the corals to frighten the fish so that the fish would swim up and there would be nets at the end waiting to catch the fish. Muro-ami is actually a fishing method that was taught to Filipinos by Okinawans in the 1930's. At that time, they were doing only for their own families and small communities. In the '70's, however, many businessmen became very greedy and began to exploit. They overused the method, thereby harming not only the environment but also human lives, in particular the children. It's still a social and an environmental problem. The ship can be out at sea for as long as anywhere from six weeks to six months without returning back to land.

[The Children] You can see how small, frail, and malnourished they are. Children are preferred as laborers because they eat very little, they don't complain, and they're very small so you can have many workers in small spaces together. Children are usually separated from their parents. They are recruited for a period of six weeks to six months for the amount of fifty US dollars. Parents and families are sometimes left without any choice. They're driven by poverty so you would find it common to see father, uncle, son, brothers all working together in the ship.

[Muro-Ami Fishing] It's called "free-dive." The oldest and the most experienced person among them is eighty-three years old and can stay underwater at a depth of about forty meters for four minutes without breathing. That's the record so far. On the average they can stay underwater to about twenty meters for about two minutes.

[The Children's Graves] The ship doesn't go back home just to bury one child. They just bury the child in the next available island. So it's very

painful for parents to learn that, when a ship comes home, their child is not on it because the child died and they wouldn't even have the body back. There's an island in the middle of the Philippines that is filled with children divers' graves.

I love the sea and my family and I always spend as much time as we can by the sea. One of the things I do not like doing in the sea or underwater is to bring any kind of camera. I've always felt that this is a very private place, and I do not like to record anything except inside me, my mind and my heart.

But in the case of "Muro-Ami," it was especially difficult because I had two crews, one underwater crew and one surface crew. So if I would work underwater, it would mean that I would go down with my tank and block the actors and give my instructions with hand signals. Moreover, we had to work with nature, so our schedules would often change, as often as the currents would change, as often as the weather would change. And it was always a question of waiting for the clouds, for hoping, for wishing, for singing for sun, for changing, and for adjusting. In other words, we were at the mercy of nature and we obeyed. We let nature control us and we just decided the moment when to capture it in images. And this is the most humbling experience ever for me as a director because I was not really in control. It's a really risky work, but I'm glad it worked eventually and I'm very lucky.

It's another kind of danger because I'm now working in the war zone. The bullets are real but I've made very many friends among bishops and ulamas, priests and imams, Muslims and Christians. When I'm working in the new film, I pray with them as often as I can. They pray five times a day, so I stop shooting five times a day. When I'm working in my Mindanao movie, where half of the people are real Muslims, I dress like them, eat like them, and encourage my crew to do the same thing. After all, it's their story, and I just happen to have the means to tell it for them. I hope it will be my next excuse to

come back to Fukuoka next year.

SHIMIZU HIROMU: The Philippines is a major power in the Asian film industry. After India, it produces the most number of films; during the 1980's and '90's, more than one hundred films a year were made. Consisting of large department stores and amusement complexes, Manila has some 20 shopping malls which also house about 10-15 movie theaters. Of the films screened, more than half are films produced in the Philippines. In the Philippines, films are the general public's number one source of entertainment.

Director Diaz-Abaya's works are certainly also entertainment but not in the sense that they are an escape from reality in the way that slapstick comedies, films with a lot of sex and violence and romantic comedies are. On the contrary, they are films which look at the realities of society. With the exception of "Jose Rizal," they constantly focus on the poor, the weak, or the oppressed, and take up issues such as poverty, society's injustices, or the problem of oppression. In that sense, I feel that Ms. Diaz-Abaya is continuing with the fine traditions of the late directors Lino Brocka and Ishmael Bernal who carried the tradition of film-making in the Philippines. She doesn't make so-called experimental films, radical films or eccentric films; she always makes films that ordinary Filipinos can see. Moreover, it is a great thing people can see her films not only in the Philippines but also in Fukuoka in Japan, in other Asian countries, and even in Europe. I feel very proud as a citizen of Fukuoka that Mr. Sato and Fukuoka City have played a large part in creating such an opportunity.

Following the monetary crisis that happened 2 or 3 years ago, funds for filmmaking in the Philippines have been restricted and it has been hard, but amid such a difficult situation, a new trend can be seen. I hear that all the films that were big hits in the Philippines last year were made by female directors. I think it is

worth noting that female directors support and lead the making of conscientious Philippine films.

I'd like to explain briefly why the Philippines is important to today's Japan. The first reason is that the people-people exchange, the connection, between Japan and the Philippines is very strong. The Philippines is a country where the people travel abroad to find work and, since the start of this year, Japan has become their number one destination. Moreover, for some three years from the beginning of the 1990's, the Filipino accounted the largest number entering into intercultural marriages with Japanese. Even now, along with those from North, South Korea and China, they are in the top group. What is more, the Philippine government has said it wants the Japanese government to issue visas that would allow Philippine nurses and care workers to work in Japan. I think the same situation exists in the Middle East and America where there are many Philippine doctors and nurses working. The same will probably occur in Japan.

The second reason is that both Japan and the Philippines were surely influenced by Western culture. I myself know nothing about the tea ceremony or Japanese flower arrangement. I have never done judo or kendo, either. I've only seen Noh or Kabuki 2 or 3 times. Rather, I have more of an interest in American music and fashion. There is the fact that many Japanese, myself included, presently live with an Americanized way of thinking and feeling and make value judgments without ever realizing it. In one sense, this awareness comes from through the contact with Filipinos, who are far more Americanized than the Japanese and whose characteristics are more conspicuous. There are many times when what one might call rediscovery, self-awareness is promoted. Filipinos are the mirror in which we see our Americanized selves reflected.

Here is the third reason. Certainly the Philippines is a poor country, the national budget is

limited and the proportion of administrative service is low. But it is exactly because of this, that mutual aid between NGOs and neighborhoods, the so-called "citizen's society," develops. The changes in Japan by structural reforms will only shrink the role of the state, I think. Therefore, in creating the future society, there will be a lot Japan can learn from the Philippines, such as the role of NGOs and how governments and NGOs can cooperate.

Thus, the Philippines is far more important country for Japan than we think. Frankly speaking, however, we don't have a really good impression of the Philippines. Therefore, I think it would be a good opportunity for us to learn through Ms. Diaz-Abaya's films that people on the screen live their lives, laugh, cry, and worry in the same way as we do. Her films have sympathized and supported by people even out of the Philippines, because I think her own convictions, and a clear message and commitment that transcend the mere technicalities of producing a film, are contained in her work.

SATO: We'll now take questions from the audience.

AUDIENCE: I was deeply moved listening to Ms. Diaz-Abaya today. I'd like to say thank you.

AUDIENCE: I've been interested in Manila for 20 years and now I feel like it is my second home but I have not known how best to explain its attraction to other people. So I am very happy when Philippine films are introduced at these events. I want to say thank you. For the people of Fukuoka and for the Japanese people, please continue such events in the future.

AUDIENCE: Meeting Ms. Diaz-Abaya today, I was able to see the dignified way in which she lives as a woman. Please make more wonderful films.

SATO: Rather than asking questions, it seems

you've been encouraged by Ms. Diaz-Abaya and have enjoyed yourselves very much. Ms. Diaz-Abaya, I hear you once planned to make a film that depicted Japanese soldiers during the War. What happened to the film?

DIAZ-ABAYA: Actually there was a big protest five years back about the comfort women from the Philippines and Korea and autobiography was written by a woman called Nana Rosa. The big studio inquired if I would be interested to film the biography of this comfort woman, but immediately I was very reluctant. I have no problem with the historicity and the fact that it happened. I have a problem with my emotions regarding the Japanese people and women because I know the expectations were to depict them as invaders and victims. Later on, however, we have taken a broader view of that experience during the Japanese occupation. I am less interested in the politics or the violence of the sexual exploitation of comfort women by Japanese soldiers during the war. I am more interested to examine how the women helped each other inside the comfort houses. Just after filming the Mindanao War, I'm not too sure if it's a good idea to go to another war, the Japanese-American War. But it is one of the things that I'm still interested in doing.

Aside from that, I'm also beginning to research for a screenplay that I'm also going to write myself about very, very old people and very, very young people. I'm interested in the Filipinos who are in their eighties and how they deal with their great-grandchildren, and I'm interested in how love can be sustained between generations so far apart and how the younger generations can deal with disabled and handicapped parents and grandparents. I'm always very moved by old people, especially when they age gracefully. That always fascinates me, the subject of old age.

AUDIENCE: I've heard Ms. Diaz-Abaya talk many times and I admire her as a woman of high

caliber with a very dignified style. The Philippines now have a woman as president and there was a woman president once before. Ms. Diaz-Abaya, don't you have any intention of becoming a politician? You're well known and I think you have the qualities appropriate for a politician, qualities such as a sense of justice and kindness.

DIAZ-ABAYA: I know personally many politicians who have my deepest respect really. As a matter of fact, President Gloria Arroyo was my teacher in Assumption College. She is an ideal woman politician, really brilliant intellectually and distinguished, very qualified for the president. But I like to work in the realm of the imagination. My heart aches to tell the stories of human beings on the big screen, in fiction. I like to go beyond what is obvious, what is visible, what can be seen. As an artist, I'm interested in what we cannot see. And in politics you have to have a special skill, a special temperament to be able to work even with people that you detest. And I'm not very good at that. I don't mind working with politicians. As a matter of fact, part of the work I do now is to join a peace forum, a dialogue between Christians and Muslims, and I'm a member now of this forum so together as a group we talk to the government, we lobby with the politicians. I think as an artist you are more free to either support the politician and to praise the politician or to protest against the politician. But thank you, I consider it a compliment.

Women directors in Philippine are now meeting regularly as a group of women and we want to work systematically to reform ourselves and the Philippine film industry, to try our very best to create, during these times especially, a cinema of hope. A cinema of hope rather than of despair. A cinema of peace rather than of violence. To insist and to campaign that people believe that life is worth it. We're a group of women that believe that it is worth working for peace, working for human rights, working for

the freedom to believe in the god in the religion of your choice. It is worth working for some of these causes even if we never see the rewards or the results in our own lifetime. Same with Mindanao issue. I will work for peace in small ways, little by little, one step at a time. If I see the peace, if I experience the peace in my lifetime, I will be very grateful. But even if I don't, it will still be worth it because then I hope that maybe my children will feel it. And this is what keeps this small group of women going at this time.

I know that Japanese have new challenges. You're not used to being poor, but the world is not going to become that very soon. We will all have to learn to live with much less, and the challenge is to live even better quality human life even if we have less wealth. I really think it is a wonderful opportunity for you as well.

I can feel the energy in the room and I'm recharged, my battery is high again. Thank you very much and I hope to see you again.

SATO: I'd like to close this forum now. Thank you very much.