

Let's have a talk with:

Jim Libiran

JIM DIAMOND M. LIBIRAN is one of Philippines best-known directors. As actors he uses real-life characters. In *Tribu* (2007), he recruited 52 gang leaders to act in this critically-acclaimed gangland film. In *Happyland* (2010) he cast a real football team.



Jim Libiran with his cast

This unconventional and divergent approach to film making characterizes Libiran's multi-faceted career – He is a multi-awarded writer, poet, essayist, print and broadcast journalist, sociologist, television producer, university lecturer and activist. *Happyland*, his second full length feature, is part of a three-pronged social entrepreneurial project that aims to promote active citizenship among the marginalized youth through sports and culture.

Libiran is working on several television projects, including documentaries on recent historical events. He is working on a film about tribal war and peace and a Second World War project. Also he is developing a little story about prostitution and the AIDS problem. All by using “found” actors. He is also actively promoting various social causes through his leadership role in several non-profit organizations.

Filmography

2011 *Batch 2011*. Short Film. 6 minutes. Digital. Aired as part of the —KINSE Human Rights Compendium II by ABS-CBN News Channel (ANC).

2010 *Happyland*. feature-length film. 98 minutes. Film.

2007 *Tribu*. feature-length film. 97 minutes. DV.

2006 *Pancit Canton*. Short Film. 3 minutes. DV.

Quotation:

Libiran, Jim (2011), interview by Helen Staufer and Michael Christopher, *manycinemas* 1, 66-74

We are welcoming Jim Libiran to our first interview. His film *Tribu* we saw at the Berlinale Filmfestival 2008. Now we are very happy that he has answered our questions in such detail.

Your film "Tribu" was critical acclaimed. Your new film "Happyland" is just released. Both movies are located in Tondo, a poor district of Manila, which is called as one of the most densely populated areas in the world. What is so special about Tondo?

I was born and raised in Tondo. More than that, it has a unique place in our history as a people - the ancient seat of power, home of kings, of poets and rebels, now reduced to a small ghetto district, home of garbage scavengers, street gangs and crime syndicate.

To fully answer your question, I have to borrow the words of writer Lito Zulueta, of the Film Critics Union of the Philippines (Manunuring Pelikulang Pilipino), who captured perfectly how I feel about Tondo:

"Jim Libiran's "Tribu" has touches of autobiography. A sociologist, poet, and documentary filmmaker and himself Tondo-bred, Libiran seems predestined to make this ultimate anthem to the Tondo of cruel lore and terrible legend, the Tondo of both gentle dreams and passionate faith.

Libiran presents Tondo's seemingly innate violence in the context of inner-city gangs that raise their industrial pipes and flick their switchblades and go on a tribal-war rampage as easily as they rap or wax poetic about their city, their personal aspirations and frustrations, like the minstrels of more bucolic, less violent times.

Libiran thoroughly knows his geography. His Tondo reeks of the true effluent of human sewage, pulsing with the din and blare of its noise and confusion, to the howl of animals led to their slaughter in Vitas. But amid the racket are also humanity and tenderness, as shown by the warm interaction during family dinners of the gang members.

This is Tondo in all its singeing but lyrical heights, in all its ballast and flare. Housewives pounce on a Meralco inspector, who uses binoculars to read the meters perched on extraordinary heights beyond human tampering, to protest high power rates. Gangs foster fellowship though the brutality of hazing and the camaraderie of drinking sessions. They celebrate life in and out of season, even as they seem bent on a bloodbath for the killing season. There's no let-up to life and passion."

(http://www.manunuri.com/reviews/tribu_blood_lusty_ballad_of_an_inner_city)

In an other interview, you told, that you have worked with seven different gangs for your movie “Tribu”. For “Happyland” you have chosen young football players. How much fiction and how much documentary is in your movies? Why do you prefer to cast authentic person instead of professional actors?

I cannot answer your questions directly because I’m not sure if we have the same reference points. All the advances in technology and human knowledge have impacted even the conventions of cinema and storytelling, that even terminologies are in a state of flux.

When I begin the process of story - be it research, writing or actual shoot – I do not think in terms of fiction or documentary. I only think of truth (as experienced or perceived), and how it can be instantiated.

My use of “found” actors, is an extension of, and an experimentation on, the Found Story writing method developed by screenwriter/director Armando “Bing” Lao. There, we are encouraged to raise the level of “mimesis-as-diegesis” to attain a more vivid narratology.

In writing, this means the inclusion of many real-world objects or events into the Characters’ “field-of-convenience.” Now this method, when transmuted into the directorial process, tend to break production conventions and grants the filmmaker not only with a new set of tools, but also a wider array of elements that he/she can employ.



Violent and gritty. Authenticity is the foreground in Tribu, foto by Luis Limanag

You asked an odd question, differentiating “authentic person” from “professional actors.” I do not know how to respond to that, truthfully.

How is life in Tondo? And what are the cinematic challenges of filming in a real/living environment? What were the reactions of the people of Tondo when they have watched your shootings and later the movie(s)?

For me, the cinematic challenges doesn't come from using Tondo as a location. The harsher challenge here is coming up with a film about Tondo and bringing it to a dreamy audience. By dreamy, I mean those audiences that expect to be lifted at least two inches or more away from their own reality. Cinema is generally regarded as the cheapest transport into an alternate reality – preferably experienced with butter popcorn and soda.

For me, personally, shooting in an artificial non-living environment would be quite horrific. Everything will have to be created, imported, employed, and therefore, paid in cash. It will give me sleepless nights.

Local residents, when we film on location, are interested only in two things – do we need more extras? Are there movie stars? Beyond that, they get profoundly bored and uninterested.

We showed Tribu to a small portion of Tondo residents, around 5,000 people, in a basketball court. The community leader (barangay captain) berated me for showing 8 seconds of sexually suggestive scene. You get the picture? [laughing]

Your film “Happyland” is connected with a social project of the same name. Can you tell us more about it?

Tribu and Happyland were both conceived as a multi-dimensional, multi-form creative project. Generally, for purist cineastes (if there is such a thing), the other dimensions should not color the film-in-itself. The film should stand on its own. But for other, less discerning audiences, the social projects add a richer emotion to the cinema experience.

In Tribu, we gathered real gang leaders and members from seven enemy gangs and put them in one project. The project succeeded in breaking their prejudices and united these gangs. The result is Tribu. Now, 4 years later, leading Tribu casts have formed “Tondo Tribe” a youth arts group built to give socially-marginalized youth a chance to contribute to culture and society. Four members of Tondo Tribe are participating in “Translating Hip-hop” a multi-country exchange program sponsored by Germany’s *Haus der Kulturen der Welt*. The Tribu boys will represent the Philippines in the “Translating Hiphop” culminating event in Berlin this coming October 2011.



Tondo Gang Sacres Brown Tribe, 2007, photo by Luis Limanag

The *Happyland* experience is a more deliberate project. The film was conceived as part of a three-legged social project, dubbed “*Project Stryker*” – aimed at changing the quality of lives of many marginalized youth thru culture and sports. *Project Stryker* includes projects that would 1) teach football to kids in poor communities, 2) prove that these kids can become successful in life thru football, 3) produce a film that would hopefully inspire more youth to hope and dream of a better life. The results are, in order: 1) *The Futbol sa Kalye* (Futkal, or “street soccer”) mobile training school; 2) The formation of *Tondo United FC*; and 3) *Happyland* the film.

We are now in the implementation/expansion stage, and the results are exhilarating. The film, the kids, the sudden reincarnation of a fighting

Philippine football team have all sent energizing waves to many sectors.
The feeling is electric!

What do you think about other alike kind of movies as the Brazilian “City of Gods” (Cidade de Deus) or “City of Men” (Cidade dos Homens), the South African “Tsotsi”, or the Hollywood Indian “Slumdog Millionaire”? All of this movies are trying to show the circumstances of living in a city out of the view of poor person.

I am aware of these films, though I haven't seen *Cidade dos Homens* and *Tsotsi*. You have an interesting view on these films. I see them as stories of the human spirit accepting their conditions and then liberating themselves from it. The transit towards liberation makes the narrative more exciting.

The topic of our edition is urban/rural and we try to look beyond the dichotomy of these two terms into a sphere in between. In “Happyland” we can see pictures of small houses and shots of a big city, of a waste dump and cargo containers (as connection to the globalized world?). Are your movies urban movies?

There is, I think, a variety of sociological views on what rural or urban is in terms of community. There also exists, of course, the old stereotypical view of rural as agricultural, vast acres of plants, tress, etc., and urban as industrial, buildings, concrete, metal, dense population.

But I also think that much of what “urban” and “rural” is defined also by the various relations existing in said places. I think the nature of a habitat impacts or encourages a certain set of relations – human to human, human to livelihood or economy, human to nature or environment, individual to state, male to female, etc. The whole ensemble of these relations and the subsequent behaviors it fosters, I believe, also define what rural and urban is.

Taken from this view, what may be viewed as urban may also contain pockets of “rural relations.” These incidentally may also be the locus of displacement or maladaptation, especially involving migrating classes of people. The sociological skew within the population is seen also be-

tween highly urbanizing vs standard urban communities, or between urbanizing and rur-ban communities [*mc's note: rur-ban, a place that has a rural setting that is in the outskirts of an urban environment*].

The rapid growth of technology and its impact on travel, communication, industry and most specially, day-to-day human lives, may be blurring the old notion of rural/urban DMZ (or “dichotomy” as you call it).

Tondo, especially, its waterfront communities, are a prime example of the clashing and mixing of “urban” and “rural.” For many decades the urban-rural push and pull have brought in hordes of migrants from Philippine provinces into the capital city Manila. For some, the shock of an alienating highly-urban culture with its exclusive economy, is enough cause to halt their migration right at the doorstep of the metropolis, which, in this case, is Tondo.

Hence, Tondo has always been the cliff where all migratory waves of rural Filipinos have smashed upon creating the social turbulence that is uniquely “Tondo.” In the 1950’s and 60’s, old-time residents still recall the islets, nooks, or city blocks defined by regional demarcations – one part is where you can find most “Waray” people (Visayans from Leyte, Samar, Masbate provinces), “Cebuanos” or “Bisayas” (Visayan of Cebuano dialect), “Tagalogs” (Luzon and Manila dialects), etc. – each maintaining their native set of culture, tradition, language and in-group sentiments. These dichotomies were severely enhanced by the emergence of street gangs. Notorious warring gangs in the 50’s and 60’s named OXO, Sigue-Sigue, Sputnik were usually formed around provincial, regional or sub-cultural divisions.

Here, we see a phenomenon of “rural” relations heightened by the “urban” habitat, resulting in a frightening social friction that have defined “urban Tondo.” Efforts to transfer, or as the government bureaucrats call it, “relocate” these migrant settlers in other parts of the Metropolis and its adjacent provinces, have resulted in various pockets of maladjusted communities generally called the “urban poor.”

The growth of these pocket communities have become satellite endpoints for present day migrants. As the mega-city grows into a huge

mega-metropolis, the “pull” from the provinces also increases. Hence, more people landing in Tondo piers everyday.

The cultural result of the “urban” vs “rural” clash of previous decades have formed into a tribal-like trait that is uniquely “Tondo” and have spawned, along with other socio-cultural influences of course, the youth street gang shown in Tribu.

Another example of these continual mixing of “rural” and “urban” is the film Happyland. The name itself, “happyland” is not an official name but the place exists in Tondo and local residents know where it is. “Happyland” is a name derived from the Waray dialect “hapilan” which means, the place where garbage is dumped. To Waray migrants, “hapilan” is a real geographical place, the name itself points to the place. Non-warays later on adapted the name sans the meaning and evolved it to “Happyland.” Visit the place and you will notice a kind of livelihood that is characteristically deep rural than urban – hunting-gathering, scavenging, charcoal making.

These are interesting phenomenon that is exciting to discuss on and on. But I guess, time and space is, and should be limited here.

*Is there any other city (or village) you would like to film a movie?
And why (or not)?*

Yes. Yes. Springing from my interest on how a certain habitat impacts the relations of a people or a sub-class of people, I would love to shoot in as many cities, rural communities, mountain villages, both here in my country and in other countries. I have here a film project proposal that looks at how certain European cities – Athens, Rome, Berlin, Paris, Madrid or Barcelona – have forced unique sets of behaviors on a specific group of people. Say, migrant Filipino workers.

I also would like to go back and forward in time and see how these present-day big cities and metropolises looked like in the past, or even how they will look like 100 years from now.

The Found story method, when extended beyond the present perceptible occurrences, because of its emphasis on milieu and its impact, could

be an exciting tool to use in drawing up future possibilities as well as painting a foreign city.

Any question you would like to ask us in return?

None. ☺



Karl Balangit plays Ebet in Tribut, photo by Leanne Jazul (2007)