

SUNDAY Lifestyle

Thelma Sioson San Juan, Editor

Who is Jun Juban and why does Oliver Stone trust him ?

BY MARGE C. ENRIQUEZ

The man behind 'Platoon,' 'Born on the Fourth of July' has a business as interesting as the blockbusters

DESPITE having some 40 foreign film to his credit, producer Lope "Jun" Juban Jr. was a virtual unknown until Bill Pullman and Claire Danes made news in Manila last year.

Juban's Philippine Film Studios Inc. was the local partner of 20th Century Fox's "Brokedown Palace," which starred these Hollywood celebs. Juban not only had the tough job of supervising the film location from Naia to Jones Bridge and Cavite but also doing the damage control of whatever negative press came their way.

That's all in a day's work for the producer who's looking forward to taking on bigger projects this year. Juban says the Philippines biggest strengths are the high level of technical expertise and that many sites could be re-engineered to look like other parts of the world.

By the end of January, actor Edward James Olmos will come for the shooting of a biopic about drug lord Manuel Noriega. Intramuros and other districts in Manila will be recreated to look like Nicaragua, in the same way that the Philippines was made to look like Thailand in "Brokedown Palace."

Barring hitches, "Little Brown Brother," a movie about the Fil-Am war will start mid-year in Ilocos.

"Code Red" could be a landmark project. It's the first time a TV series "Hawaii 5-0" promoted Hawaii.

Best Advertisement

At the start of his 20-year career, Juban had to explain to prospective foreign producer about his achievements with such titles as MGM's "Year of Living Dangerously," starring Mel Gibson and Sigourney Weaver, and Paramount "An Officer and a Gentleman," starring Richard Gere and Debra Winger. (The opening scene was shot in Olongapo.)

Not until “Platoon” won Oscar Best Picture did questions about his qualifications stop. Director Oliver Stone must have found the Philippines lucky, that he returned to shoot “Born on Fourth of July,” with Vigan made to look like Mexico.

Having a foreign movie produced in the Philippines is the best advertisement yet. “No sane producer or studio would bring the cast over to a country perceived as unstable,” says Juban.

If the film becomes successful word about the location shooting not only gets around in the industry but to the audience as well. “It still beats showing a nipa hut or a tourism symbol,” he says.

Aside from foreign investment, movies give jobs to many people, including the locals. The production crew also gets to sharpen its skills.

Liaison officer

Juban didn’t have any plans of entering the family business. His father Lopezino, a retired military officer, established Philippine Movie Production in the ‘60s. He originally rented blank firing arms. When he died in 1972, Dennis, the eldest, took over.

In summer, the young Juban would work on the set acting as a gopher and doing odd jobs. In the mid-‘70s, Dennis got his break when he was promoted from liaison military officer to the Philippine coordinator for Francis Ford Coppola’s Vietnam-war movie “Apocalypse Now.”

During the “Ride of Valkyries” sequence, the attack on a Vietnamese village, Juban made sure the Philippine Air Force pilots cast in the movie were well taken care of.

Dennis also produced “Ganito Kami Noon, Paano Kami Ngayon?,” which raked in most of the awards in the Metro Manila Film Festival. Yet, despite the critical acclaim, it flopped in the box office.

“Being an independent producer doing one or two films wouldn’t work. You’ll be at the mercy of theater owners,” says Juban.

People Power

If Dennis were still alive, Juban a De La Salle graduate of liberal arts and commerce, would have been working in a bank or a firm. He idolized Dennis, an honors student who topped the engineering board exam.

In 1978, Dennis died in a helicopter crash while scouting for a movie site. Juban took over to provide jobs for the crew who had worked for the family for years.

Barely 20, Juban was at an age when he felt he could do anything. Despite objections from the family and his girlfriend, he took the risk. He concentrated on foreign productions as he didn’t have enough capital to produce Filipino movies.

The first obstacle was to convince foreign producer Juban was reliable. Fortunately Andre Morgan, the right-hand man of Golden Harvest’s Raymond Chow and Dennis’ friend, told Sanrio Films the young Juban could deliver.

Juban offered to produce “Don’t Cry, It’s Only Thunder,” starring Dennis Christopher and Susan St. James. He asked only for allowance and gasoline money.

Morgan’s recommendation paved the way for more foreign movie productions. Producers were impressed that the Philippines could be made to look like any part of the world, and with the high standards of technical expertise.

At 40, Juban has handled schmuck, action movies, big-studio projects. When Jacky Chan was doing “Project Eagle,” there was an action scene requiring a horse

chase. Between shooting, Juban rode the horse, and he eventually took up polo as sport.

Juban got his big break in “Platoon.” Stone, who had heard about Juban, introduced himself. Since “Platoon” had a previous commitment with another local producer, Juban told Stone to settle things before they did business.

“Platoon” was filmed in Cavite while People Power, the four-day bloodless revolt against the Marcos regime, was going on at Edsa.

Amid the Edsa revolt, Juban had provide the movie production military requirement such as chopper. Even if Juban got the permit from Gen. Fabian Ver, who had by then left the country, then Gen. Fidel Ramos still honored it and supported the production all the way. The filming finished in eight weeks and stayed within budget.

When the film was ready, Stone sent a poster and wrote a dedication: “To Jun, who made the impossible happen.”

No Blackmail

Juban renamed the outfit Philippine Film Studios Inc. When foreign producer ask, “What does your studio have?” Juban replies, “Hot air.”

If Philippine Film Studios could afford the movie budget, it could coproduce. When dealing with studio movie, it’s a different story.

“They don’t need your money, panggulo lang kayo,” he says. “You act as a corporate umbrella. You make sure the requirements are delivered and make sure you give the best that’s available. You have to maintain loyalty and respect.”

Studios can be at the mercy of their local partners if they’re wily. “They need your expertise, but foremost it’s honesty. You can tell them the chair costs P5,000 when it’s really P500. If they have a big budget, they won’t complain. But why should you do that? How can you sleep well?”

He doesn’t believe in accepting commission for himself. “That’s why I fight for my people’s salaries. I want to give them the best possible rate, so we don’t take anything away from them. If the is small, I say, Lets adjust. Then you can look at them straight in the eye and tell them, You’d better work.

“There’s a thin line between gratuity and blackmail. There could have been a problem. Madaling ipitin. But we can’t allow that the return is horrendous.”

Best and worst

Although Philippine Film Studios make sure they make things easier for foreign film companies, Juban also stand up for his crew. “Make sure foreigner are not putting one up over our guys.”

He also caution foreign producers about cultural differences, such as not to wag fingers at Filipinos and reprimand them in public.

He recalls that when petty things were lost on the set and a producer wanted to scrutinize the local crew, he would always stand up for his men. “Why don’t we do it this way. Kapkapan ang foreign crew. If they don’t see it, then we’ll admit it. Why blame only us? We’re all in it together.”

During the shooting of “platoon,” Stone instructed Juban’s production manager to leave the cherry picker (a crane) on the hilltop in Los Baños. He was planning to shoot immediately on Monday. The Filipino manager told his American counterpart, who, it turned out, didn’t want to pay for the weekend charges and had it removed from the set.

When Stone came to work on Monday, he threw a fit when he saw the crane still being positioned. It usually took nearly three hours, so it came out to be more expensive.

The fuming director kicked the Filipino production manager, thinking he had disobeyed. The Filipino hit him back with a clutch bag. The American manager failed to explain to Stone she had ordered to have the cherry picker removed.

When Juban arrived on the set, he scolded stone, who later realized it was not the manager's fault. Arnold Kopelson, the producer, apologized for the misunderstanding.

Juban keeps in touch with Kopelson, who has become one of the most powerful producer in the Hollywood. He produced such movies as "Seven" and "The Fugitive."

Having been in the business for nearly 20 years, Juban says he's seen the best and worst in human nature. Some lesser-known producers tend to be more egoistic and unreasonably demanding. "Even if you've give them an arm and a leg, they still want your other half."

But he also acknowledges their good side. Stone acknowledged "the warm people of the Philippines" for their hospitality in his acceptance speech when he won an Oscar for Best Director in "Born on the Fourth of July."

Optimistic

What keeps Juban motivated is giving jobs to his crew. He admits it can be a feast-or-famine business. When the Aquino administration was plagued by rebellion, foreign producers shied away from the Philippines, leaving his workers with nothing to do.

Fortunately projects started returning. He got to produce one of the largest European miniseries, "In the Name of the Queen," a movie about the Dutch-Indonesian war

Chuck Norris did three movies, In Norris "Missing in Action," Jean Claude Van Damme was merely the fifth stuntman then.

Last year, MGM shot "Kiss the Sky," with William Petersen and Gary Cole. He also did commercials for AT&T, Visa International for New York, BBDO and Siemens

Juban measure success not by jobs but by quality of projects. "I keep telling the staff that we are only as good as our last film. But I've always been optimistic. If I were not optimistic, I would not have started at all."