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Jonathan Laxamana Interview

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Interviewer: Kevin Galanto

Interviewee: Jonathan Laxamana

In-Person Interview: Starbucks in Lincoln Park, IL

Date: 5/3/2011

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during the 2011 Spring Quarter as part of the **Asian American Art Oral History Research Project** conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media*



Bio: Jonathan Laxamana is the Program Director for the Chicago Filipino American Film Festival. To learn more about CFAAF visit: www.cfaff.org

Kevin Galanto: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Jonathan Laxamana: I was born in Oak Park, Illinois in 1970 and I lived in the city most of my adult life. But I grew up in the suburb Addison. I went to Addison Trail High School and I graduated there in 1988, and graduated from the University of Illinois at Champaign in 1992. I've been working in the publishing business since then.

KG: Can you tell me a little about your family and growing up?

JL: I have one brother. My parents both came here from the Philippines, my mother came to the United States as part of the nursing program of the 60s and my father was here earlier to work

with his aunt who had a business on the South Side. So my dad actually might have been here before the wave of nurses that brought my mom here. My mom came here with a bunch of other nurses in the 60s. I was born at the hospital she worked at. We lived just around the corner for a few years. My mom worked at that same hospital for about 40 years, she retired last year and I think she's the only nurse I know of that worked at the same place throughout her career. My mom held the same job for about 40 years and my dad worked at maybe two different places in all of the time he worked. In terms of family, we grew up in the suburbs where it was kind of remote in terms of other Filipinos. There was a group of people my mom went to nursing school with and we all lived within a few blocks of each other in this little suburb. So growing up we didn't have a lot of extended family but we were kind of each other's extended family. We were the only Filipino kids, so I think it was pretty much a typical suburban background. My parents still live in the same house and they're both retired. My brother lives a little bit further out west and they're actually adopting a child from the Philippines.

KG: So how big of an impact did your family have on you as an artist?

JL: That's a good question. I remember we always used to watch movies and TV together and things like that so I've always had an interest in media in general. So there's that, and on the other hand, when I went to college, I was the only one who didn't pursue a vocation, that is, a job that had a specific title like engineer or doctor...

KG: Yeah my parents are like that. They wanted me to choose a specific major.

JL: Yeah, they couldn't understand that-- 'what are you gonna do with an English major?' but I've actually been working in the industry for many years.

KG: How did you get involved in the Filipino art community?

JL: I think I had some friends that had always been a part of the Filipino community even though I never really was involved before.

KG: Why did you?

JL: I'd talk to friends and relatives out in California and they all grew up where everyone was Filipino, but I didn't really have that. I'd like to reach people who were probably the same way I was like five years earlier. That didn't really have a connection to Filipino culture.

KG: Why did you decide to be a part of the Chicago Filipino America Film Festival?

JL: I think this was right after the release of the movie *The Debut* back in 2003, when it came through town I guess there was a lot of energy and it kind of just inspired people in the Filipino community here to say 'why don't we have a film festival?' and there was a lot of great films. They were really motivated and one of the people I knew, she had suggested that since I had a writing background and a journalism background and kind of a film writing background-- they

thought I'd be a great person to research potential films for the festival. So it's about 8 years later and I'm still doing it.

KG: Since the conception of the film festival, what impact do you think it has had so far?

JL: Over the years we've reached, I don't know some few thousand people, some several thousand people but I want to think at least for some of them, that there was an opportunity to see a film that they probably never would have seen. Not just the audience but the filmmaker. The thing about film, it's not like playing the guitar; you can play the guitar in the kitchen, in a room with a lot of people, or a concert. But with film there isn't a personal version where you can just do it. You have to do it with the intention of there being an audience, so just as we try to provide the audience a chance to see these films we also kind of want to shed some light on these filmmakers. To give them an opportunity, because just the fact they got into a film festival makes it a better opportunity to see where they come from, or to understand the jokes, or the actors appeal and the stories appeal to the audience in a different way than at other festivals. I think it helps open opportunities for them. A few years there was a film *Leave it to Chance* by Bernard Badion. He was a first time filmmaker, he didn't really have a background but he decided to buy a camera and shoot a movie with people he knew. It was a great little film, and they wound up going down to one of the Filipino American conferences a few years ago. Then they went on a tour to a number of colleges, so it became really popular among colleges. One of the few things I like about that particular case is that, not only that we found him and found people to see his film, but we really provided him the exact audience he that he should have connected with and that's young Filipino Americans and Asian Americans.

KG: So what's the selection process for films? Are there particular films that you'll chose over another?

JL: I think our base guideline is that a film should be by a Filipino, or about Filipino characters, or feature Filipino performers. So that's the major criteria. I think the more of those we can get lined up the better. If someone makes a really great film but maybe because of where he is located geographically, or the talent he can find, maybe he wasn't able to find a Filipino actor for the main role. So we've run films that have had no Filipinos in the cast, and we've also had films that were about issues really relevant to Filipinos but it was by a non-Filipino person.

KG: That just answered my next question perfectly.

JL: In terms of the other criteria, I think we generally try to look at the films at face value, we try to look at it in terms of the audience: will they enjoy it?

KG: So marketability?

JL: Yeah kind of. The way we set up and position the festival, it's not essential for every film to sell really well. But it is essential that somebody go to that film and someone at least see the

film. We've had screenings in a theatre that seats 1300 people with screening of really great films but maybe depending on the time we scheduled it, has had like only 12 people show up. It's sometimes really difficult to sell on that particular day and particular time. A lot of issues with film festivals is that it's limited. So people have to be there, a film isn't running every couple hours like at the mall. Ideally we try to get films that have somewhat of a buzz. Also just films that we watched and enjoy, films that we think are good or can see the audience enjoying it. We've shown films on poverty or political oppression and the response we'll often hear is, 'oh that film was really depressing but it was worthwhile'. I feel that there is such a selection of films out there. I think it's nice when an audience member expresses a feeling that is unique.

KG: I wanted to go to the festival this year, but it was my dad's birthday. His 50th birthday and I didn't want to leave him especially because he's old now.

JL: That was actually a special type of program we did at the Siskel Center. The festival itself is in November and is a 3 day event. So you should look out for that. The recent event was the Chicago Asian American Showcase.¹ We've been helping promote each other's events, for a number of years. I think at the Showcase they'll invite people to create a shorts program for them because creating a program of short films can often be as difficult as programming the rest of the festival. So it saves them the trouble but it also allows them to connect with the audience of another event.

KG: Sometimes my mom drags me to Filipino romance movies, so I wanted to bring her to the film festival to give my mom more variety.

JL: What's interesting about Filipino films, is the mainstream and indie there. The Philippines, this may still be the case, or Korea might have overtaken them, but the Philippines for a long time had the largest domestic film production outside of the United States or possibly India. Normally when you think of foreign films or international films you think of France but when you go there and look at the movie listings it's all American movies. So there are a lot of Filipino films, and of those, a lot are created as popular entertainment, and many of them take their cues from soap operas and things like that.

KG: Yeah I technically grew up on The Filipino Channel and the soap operas, they're engrained in my head.

JL: Haha, yeah there are a lot of little tropes, that tend to be melodramatic. A lot of spontaneous accidents things like that.

KG: Filled with a lot of twists that would never really happen.

JL: Yeah things like a family, like two brothers are arguing then one of them gets hit by a car. Well if he didn't get hit by the car would they still be arguing? Is that what they're trying to say?

But there is a really great tradition of independent films in the Philippines. It's something that we want to do, give independent filmmakers a chance.

KG: Talking about filmmakers, do you see yourself as a Filipino American artist or an Asian American artists or just simply a filmmaker? Or do you feel that there's always this "Asian" part?

JL: For me it's strange because I'm kind of involved in writing related disciplines and film related disciplines so professionally I don't really have this artistic outlook, the only artistic outlook for me is the film. So since I work on the Filipino American Film Festival I suppose I would relate more to the Filipino American film then anything else. If I were to work on anything else, if I had a film of my own I might be targeting the broader Asian American audience but I think it would still be distinctly Filipino American.

KG: So with the film festival what has changed since you started in it?

JL: We moved from having a few screenings in a high school auditorium to a theatre with 200 seats to a theatre with 1300 seats. It's a classic old time cinema theatre that's probably our most outward, cosmetic change. I think internally I would have to say we are in a position to help filmmakers a lot more. Especially with the rise of social networking and social media, just the fact that the filmmaker got into a festival gets so highly publicized even if not a lot of people go to the film the word is still out there. One of the main changes was sustainability-- we didn't want it to just be a program that we'd just throw money at it and create something. We wanted in the long run for it to pay for itself and not cost anyone a lot of money.

KG: Now that the film festival is over, do you have any plans for the next one?

JL: Yeah we're just kind of starting off. Next week we plan on recruiting volunteers. Our parent organization is actually the Filipino American Network² and every year we have a volunteer mixer where people show up talk to us and decide which event they want to volunteer in. Then we start calling for submissions. We have a period where all we're doing is watching films and bouncing through them. When it starts to get a couple months before the festival that's when we really start trying to get the word out. Hopefully, if you get the word out early more people will remember you have to stay on people's radar. We're also doing a series of films about Jose Rizal in various venues across the city. That's not really a part of the Chicago Filipino American Film Festival but we're helping out with it. There's probably a period of one to two months where we're not actively working on the film festival but I get correspondence all year from filmmakers. We're always trying to know what's happening with other film festivals and things like that.

KG: It seems like you love what you do.

JL: Yeah I do. It's like you don't have to worry as much about 'how much I like my job?' I've been doing this for eight years. It's longer than I've attended any school and worked in any job, I'll always identify myself with working on this film festival with more than I would identify myself with my actual job. I think when I realized that a few years ago, that I've been working on this longer than my longest time of employment which was five years. So it was really interesting it really struck me that I invested that much time in this.

KG: I was about 11 when you started.

JL: Yeah, ha ha. It's great. You see the people who were children or young teens when they first start coming to the film festival and now they're adults. First they went to college and now they're out of college. Maybe in a few years, I'll be seeing their kids.

KG: Doesn't that make you feel a little old?

JL: No...ha ha ha, definitely. I tend to be involved with things like media, arts, and things that I think a lot of people my age tend to slow down on, so it kind of works both ways I think.

KG: Well that's all I got, thank you for your time.

JL: No problem.

END

¹ To learn more about the Asian American Showcase and the Foundation for Asian American Independent Media visit: <http://www.faaim.org/>

² To learn more about the Filipino American Network visit: <http://fan-chicago.org/>