

Public Lives

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The immortal FPJ

When a man as popular and as deeply-loved as Fernando Poe Jr. dies, we can be sure that many will try to claim him as one of their own. But FPJ always knew where he belonged – with the *masa*. Da King is not dead; he lives in their consciousness.

He was their hero, their benefactor, their protector, and friend. He gave them hope for a better life, but above all, he showed them what a Filipino in these times could be. Loyal, kind, brave and strong.

Every society in every age projects a model of the national character. In Europe, it was the educated aristocrat who lived for the arts. In Latin America, it was the cavalier, the gallant horseman who personified courtesy and nobility. In Japan, it was the warrior who lived by a strict code of chivalry. In the Philippines, it is the quiet ordinary man who never bothers anyone, keeps his emotions in check in the face of provocation, but stands as a pillar of strength against abuse.

FPJ portrayed that kind of man in the movies, even as he strove to live his life by that same ideal. He didn't talk much in his films or in real life. He preferred the casual conversation of his loyal buddies over the rituals of social gatherings. He avoided the limelight not out of snobbishness, but out of shyness. He put a distance between him and those who would peer into his private life. In a world that made it its business to report every detail of an actor's life, FPJ remained an intensely private person. As an actor, he shunned all media interviews. He never promoted his own films. To solicit votes as a candidate and court media approval would have been, for him, the most arduous thing he had ever done.

Individuals like him measure their worth not by the amount of money they have but by the fidelity of their friends and followers. To the needy they give not out of pity, but from a deep sense of duty. They

expect nothing in return. Their power over their men is not based on acquired or inherited rights but on the grace of their charisma.

Though they are leaders of men, it is camaraderie they seek more than sheer power. They themselves avoid being beholden to the wealthy and powerful, though the latter may often seek their friendship. Respect is the tribute the powerful pay to such natural leaders.

These are not feudal lords; they are rather the present counterpart of our pre-hispanic tribal leaders. They eat and drink with their men. They fight the same battles, share the same jokes, and sing the same songs. They wear the same clothes, eat the same food, and wipe their faces with the same cheap towels permanently slung over their necks. But the hierarchy is inviolable and it is affirmed by the ultimate responsibility the leader takes for the actions of all his men.

So immense is this responsibility that the leader instinctively thinks first of the welfare of his men before he would ask them to do anything for him. Wisdom overrides pride. Restraint is the rule. For the leader is aware of the high cost of impulse.

The responsibility comes with the territory. FPJ's charismatic authority extended beyond his studio. He was the entire movie industry's leader, a role he shared with his bosom buddy and fellow actor, Joseph "Erap" Estrada. These two men were passionately protective of the industry and knew its vital role in the lives of the ordinary people who watched their movies. They felt answerable to them.

FPJ and Erap were a category by themselves. By the time they migrated to the world of politics, their stature in the eyes of the *masa* had gone beyond the movie roles they played. This was especially true for FPJ, whose distance and reserve in real life closely paralleled the traits he personified in film. The mystique of FPJ was larger than Erap's. He evoked awe where Erap elicited comradeship. The *masa* loved Erap, but they revered FPJ.

FPJ was too pure for politics. His charisma clashed with the requirements of political battles. There was a real danger that politics

could dissolve the very things that the *masa* valued in him – his remoteness from all ambition, his disdain for power, his decency, and his independence. The political arena forced him to articulate his ambition, to explain his quest for power, and to risk his integrity and independence by the alliances he had to make. He was already king in the hearts of the *masa*. People who admired him asked why, in heaven's name, did he aspire to be a mere politician.

His charisma was his weapon, but it was also his vulnerability. From day one, the enemy's artillery was aimed at demystifying him. They questioned his citizenship, they dug up his private life in order to cast doubt on his integrity, and most of all they belittled his intelligence by pointing out his limited formal schooling. Through all this, he kept quiet, staunchly refusing to retaliate in kind. The media mocked his reticence and equated it with ignorance.

Even as Congress was locked in a highly disputed canvass, he remained a responsible leader till the end, carefully skirting the dangerous path to demagoguery. He kept the flames under such a tight lid that his opponents thought he had no fire in the belly when he refused to lead his supporters into the streets. How badly they misread him!

In death, FPJ has finally prevailed. As president of this country, he would have governed for at most six years. Part of him would have died during that period. But now he lives forever in the memory of the *masa* to whom he will always be the kind of human being they want him to be.

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