

## **PUBLIC LIVES**

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Randy David

### **Willing victims**

This is not about the three Filipinos who were put to death in China the other day for heroin smuggling -- though it may well apply to them. They were victims of drug syndicates, of a harsh justice system, and perhaps of a desire to find a quick way out of poverty. They most likely knew what they were getting into. In that sense, they were willing victims.

But this piece is about another type of willing “victims” – ordinary people who recount intimate details of their selves and lives on television, permitting themselves to become the objects of pity or to be made fun of -- in exchange for money and gifts, fleeting television exposure, and the prospect of being “discovered.” I am putting the word “victims” between quotation marks here because the participants evidently do not see themselves as victims. On TV5’s primetime show “Willing Willie,” they view themselves as the lucky beneficiaries of the compassion and generosity of the show’s controversial host Willie Revillame. They travel from faraway provinces and line up for hours just to be part of the studio audience.

Willie’s program and style of hosting have been criticized even while he was with the rival station ABS-CBN. Observers of the mass media think his language is often crude, insensitive, and risqué. But that’s probably what his admirers precisely like about him -- his folksiness. Others believe the whole program preys on the poverty and desperation of ordinary Filipinos in the guise of offering them consolation and praising them for their persistence. By dispensing bundles of cash at will, he emerges as primetime’s patron of the poor, Philippine television’s most generous host. But this type of program is not a monopoly of Willie Revillame. Philippine TV as a whole has long been notorious for routinely making a spectacle of the misfortune and poverty of ordinary people.

Clearly, Willie's brand of mass entertainment brings in a lot of money for himself as well as for the station he works for. It is not at all surprising that "Willing Willie" is TV5's flagship program. Every other program on this channel seems to rely on the show's power to draw audiences and advertisements. That explains why it enjoys the unique privilege of virtually being open-ended in its daily two-hour time slot. Nobody is expected to protest if Willie whimsically decides to go beyond his allotted time, as he usually does. He is the center of gravity of the station's entire programming.

Willie has recently come under fire for repeatedly prodding a six-year-old boy, Jan-Jan, a contestant in his program, to perform the highly suggestive dance associated with naked male dancers who perform in gay bars. What gave the whole Jan-Jan episode a touch of cruelty and abuse was the fact that, throughout his performance, the little boy was in tears. As he gyrated on the raised platform that focused all attention on him, the studio audience gleefully and lustily shouted in approval, soaking in every moment of Jan-Jan's innocent macho dance virtuosity.

Advocates of children's rights castigated this brazen violation of a child's dignity. To prove that Willie Revillame crossed the line of good sense and decency, they posted a clip of the child's performance on YouTube, virally spawning a chorus of global condemnation. The Department of Social Welfare and Development wrote the management of TV5 a strong letter protesting the episode. So did the Commission on Human Rights. Complaints over the same episode inundated the Movie and Television Regulation and Classification Board (MTRCB), demanding severe sanctions on the show and its host. To its credit, the station's management quickly responded to the criticisms by apologizing and by promising to institute measures aimed at preventing similar incidents in the future.

Interestingly, the public commentary on the issue is divided. Willie's defenders argue that there was no child abuse here because the boy's sexy dance was voluntary and was completely with the consent of his

parents. The boy's father, who was in the studio, also said that Jan-Jan had previously performed the same dance at school events and inside shopping malls. The boy was not forced to do it, the station said. The reason he was in tears, they claimed, was because he was frightened by the sight of a tall basketball player inside the studio. Others dismiss the entire affair as a non-issue, saying you can't argue with popular culture, or legislate taste, or make a moral issue out of it.

I believe that child abuse is pretty obvious in this case. The boy has been exploited by his parents and by "Willing Willie." Parents do not own their children, and parental consent does not make what is patently wrong right. Jan-Jan's parents claim that they did not force him to dance like that. But, is a six-year old boy at liberty to choose? One of the declared policies of the State under our constitution is to promote and protect the youth's "physical, moral, spiritual, intellectual, and social well-being." If the State takes this mandate seriously, it will find itself protecting the youth against parents like Jan-Jan's.

But beyond protecting the vulnerable against victimization, there is another thing that a decent society does for itself. It distinguishes between base pleasures and higher pleasures, always aiming to promote the latter, even when the public may prefer the former. What sets the noble from the base is the ideal of human dignity to which all civilized communities aspire. To let Willie Revillame determine for us where our pleasures as a nation lie is to give up this ideal.

[public.lives@gmail.com](mailto:public.lives@gmail.com)