

# Getting Personal with John Torres

Alexis Tioseco

*John Torres is currently one of the most promising young film-makers in the Philippines. His film, 'Salat', was recognized at the Cinemania International Film Festival Ishmael Bernal Award for Young Cinema. Recently, the independent film-maker tied for the Fipresci-Netpac Critics Award at the 19<sup>th</sup> Singapore International Film Festival, with his debut full-length feature, 'Todo Todo Teros'.*

The no-budget 'Todo Todo Teros' fuses on-screen text, an intimate and introspective voice-over, images and footages of his friends, Filipino musicians and performance artists. It is about an artist who wakes up to find that he is a terrorist. He is sent abroad to bomb subways. A videotape emerges. This stranger talks to the camera and a familiar voice reacts, blasting as they move along. The film is concerned essentially with the way we terrorize the ones we love. It is also a surreal take on Manila, and how artists can subvert a culture by the mere act of creating works that empower and transform.

Torres has been honing his film technique through his short films, using found and organized footage with a voice-over narration, and scenes which were shot before a script was written.

In his current film, he has created a tour-de-force in the world of DV features. At the cost of a few mini-DV tapes, it triumphs over many expensive films, and serves as a beacon for those who believe that conviction, commitment, sincerity, honesty and truth move audiences better than marketing tricks, publicity stunts, mind-blowing

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**"I felt I needed to [make this film]. It's not just about an encounter between two people who barely knew each other, the experience of being drawn to a person, a stranger; and not knowing what happened. When you talk about home, [coincidences], beauty, you cannot rush these ideas; you need time to contemplate and reflect [and this is what I did through my film]."**

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action, and overblown celebrities. In his speech upon receiving an award, John made the following dedication: "[This award is] for anyone who doesn't even have a camera but has a story to tell. You don't have to have money, budget, crew, staff, [or] a finished script to make a film. This is in a way terrorizing the current system of how we make and distribute films."

As in his four previous shorts (the *Otros Trilogy*, and *Gabi noong sinabi ng ama kong may anak siya sa labas* (The Night When Father Told Me He Had a Child Outside), 'Todo Todo Teros' is a testimony of confessions (literally and figuratively) of love and weaknesses, pain, and transgressions. For John Torres, you see, everything is personal. Even interviews, as Alexis Tioseco finds out.



Film poster

## In Berlin

**AT:** Tell me about your experience in Berlin, and what happened while you were there.

**JT:** I had been invited as a film-maker to a small film festival in Berlin last September for one of my short films *Tawidgutom* (my first short film) and it was my first time travelling alone out of my country. Everything [seemed] new, and I was a stranger to all the people there. But I needed that time also, to realize that I can live on my own, and that there was this entirely new world other than Katipunan Avenue, where I grew up and spend most of my time. When I was there, I met this Russian guide, Olga, at the festival. She took me around, and we got to know each other a lot. So everyday, she'd take me places, and I had my camera on, and what you see there [in the film] is what happened, but more than that, there are a lot of things that happened with the camera off. To keep it short, we really, really got to know each other and I was really drawn to [her]. I have a girlfriend, whom I love dearly, and I treaded into a subject matter that is really sensitive. You ask yourself, do you really love this person [your girlfriend]? And if so, why are you this much drawn to another person, and why are you spending so much time with that person? To put it bluntly, it's about infidelity. Where do you draw the line, and when will you know [that you have stepped over it]? That is a very, very difficult thing to tackle. My father had dealt with that, and I've seen the effects on my mother,

as well as the whole family, so it's a very, very sensitive subject, especially to me. And now I am being challenged [by having to confront the issues myself].

**AT:** When you say you're being challenged, you're being challenged by someone or something?

**JT:** Well, my beliefs are being challenged because I've always believed that you don't do such a thing; you don't spend time and become really intimate with another person, when you have a commitment, when you are [already] into a really serious relationship, which I have with my girlfriend.

**AT:** Oh, did Olga know you have a girlfriend?

**JT:** I told Olga after a few days [with her] because when we were just getting to know each other, [I felt] it wasn't the right time to tell her, but eventually I did, and she told me, she had a ...they're separated now, but not yet at the time, a... [trails off]

**AT:** ...a what?

**JT:** husband. And wow! It was near the end of the trip, and I... she just told me, "well you didn't ask me". And I was shocked, you know. I was very, very much drawn to this person, and it was unexplainable. I don't know! That's why I was trying to process all these things. Was I drawn to the newness of things? Was I just responding to my lost teenage

years, because I never had the chance to get the attention of other people, girls, during cotillions\* or soirées; I never had those because I was in a long-term relationship. So I was thinking: "is it just a response, just scratching my itch?" All those things. So yeah, these processes were included as my way of making films. I don't have a script; I shoot when I need to. When making

the film, I didn't have a clue where I was headed. And it's very much to my liking because I get to process. And in the end, somehow miraculously, it all makes sense.

**AT:** When you say it all makes sense, do you mean in your films?

**JT:** Yes, my films.

**AT:** And do you also mean things in your head with regard to your relationships, with regard to Olga, and your girlfriend, Ina?



*A scene in 'Todo Todo Teros'*



**JT:** It all makes sense but it's another thing to accept, you know; accept that you are really weak; accept or take the blame, but it makes sense. I'm getting to know myself more, I'm getting to understand even [those] people who make such mistakes, just like my dad. People who cheat don't get these caricature images from me anymore. I try to be more tolerant because I accept my own weaknesses, and my humanity. And I hope

that with my film, even if it really tackles the terrorist in you who destroys things and people dear and close to you, people will try to understand it more [about the terrorism we are capable of] and that it can help to paint a more human picture of people [in such circumstances].

## On Terrorism

**AT:** What spawned the idea of using terrorism as a metaphor in the way you did in this film?

**JT:** Loving deals a lot with building and destroying things we hold dear. We can be terrorists not only to strangers but also to our loved ones. That was what I wanted to explore: the beloved as terrorist to you and your world. We have this notion of terrorists as strangers who invade from out of nowhere, this crazed criminal who sneaks in and either goes away unscathed or dies with you, and you never know who he is. You are never intimate with him in the first place, but you empathize with the victims, and you are forced to hate the perpetrator of the crime. I wanted people to see that we can be terrorists in ways not as extreme or radical as those we see on CNN or BBC.

**AT:** You have the narrative running through three channels in 'Todo Todo Teros': the voice-over, the on-screen text, and of course, the images themselves. What inspired your use of on-screen text and is there a logic to its utilization? At times, it contains the use of the first person I – "*I just read that...*". Is there a reason that you chose not to read these statements instead?

**JT:** In the film, I talk about being constantly under surveillance, so along with the characters, I try to communicate not just through voice but also through written word, SMS, song, performance, drawn images,

and even gibberish/invented language. I don't know, maybe all the wiretapping and the "mother of all tapes" coming out in the news [referring to the scandal regarding Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and the alleged taped conversations between her and the head of the election commission during the last Presidential Election campaign] have prepared me to resort to this mode of storytelling. (laughs)

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**"The most important thing for me to say is that after all, after everything's been destroyed in your life, after you've been terrorized, what matters is that you've processed [what happened], and you learn to move on, and embrace all these things. That's the most important thing for me to say in this film."**

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**AT:** I appreciate the amount of honesty and humility that goes into [your works]. And I think that is something that is very, very evident in things that are said or the lines of text that appear on screen. Like when you mention tricking her into saying "*mahal kita*", which means "I love you" in Filipino, because she doesn't understand. And your own admission of knowing what to say that will make her laugh, and perhaps relating this to the terrorist way.

**JT:** (laughs). *Salamat* [Thank you]. I can be really scheming also as a person because I know that I know some things. But with my films, I have to make film-making count for me, and this is where I have to be honest. And this is where my films will become living testimonies of who I am. I have to be honest in each one, because they will haunt me when I grow old; they will talk to me; and when I die, they will still be there. Who is going to believe me, a dead person from the past? But then they watch these films that are so alive, who are they going to believe? So there's no way I can make a film that will not count because I would want to die for those films, to give a part of me, to give a large part of me to those films. It has to be painful; no, it doesn't have to be painful all the time but painful in a way that you really, really devote much time and really give a lot of your effort, your blood, and yourself to the making of it.

**AT:** There's a line toward the end of the film, perhaps you can correct me on it, something to the effect of "This is my cinema..."

**JT:** "This unfortunately is my cinema, I..." is the text, and it comes from the man behind the surveillance camera, telling Bughaw, the wife: "I cannot interfere now because I am part of the government, and I have team members also, and strict rules to follow. This is my cinema, I can only watch, I cannot give you what I know. I can only watch you helplessly, and you suffer." I believe somehow, even with just his



presence and his concern, it will make her reconcile. He's talking about the text message from Berlin, supposedly from Olga to her husband, but it was intercepted by the government.

**AT:** When he's saying "my cinema", is he speaking from the perspective of the audience, rather than as a film-maker?

**JT:** Yes. Just a spectator. Just like the opening scene "our cinema" and you see the [alleged] terrorist just watching, suffering in front of the [cinema screen] beating their own skin. But they cannot reach out to their subjects. Or to the screen. There is a separation, and there is a certain sense of helplessness somehow, that you're just watching, that you cannot really make a difference, as a watcher. So it deals with a topic that I try to discuss also which is that the film-maker creates works that empower, and that somehow subvert a culture. I delve on film-making, and how you put a premium on pouring your heart out, and not really focusing on finances, and even distribution – just putting it out on the streets.

**AT:** Bughaw, the wife character, is going to give her work to the pirates?


**JT:** It's more of letting the world know that yes, I suffered this, and I [survive]. I don't deny my part in this tragedy or in this destruction. I declare my survival in the midst of all these. In that way, you will hear her breathe, you will see that she holds the camera.

**AT:** Does it matter that Olga, the antagonist in the film, is white?

**JT:** There is that angle also, because it talks about terrorism, and somehow, as you know, foreigners have this image of Filipinos as terrorists in a political way, terrorists who come as strangers. And yes at first it mattered, that the colour of her skin was different from my brown skin, but I needed to graduate from that plot, and delve more into an important issue which concerns [the notion that you can be] a terrorist to people you love, and it doesn't matter anymore if you're white or if you're from another background. I think it helped that you first showed the reality, then debunk it, and make a mockery of the labels of "terrorists, etc." which have been [attached] to Filipinos – Southeast Asians as terrorists. And you tell the outside community, the foreigners, people who are not Filipinos, that we are not bitter, that we [don't feel] stuck with that. We try to retaliate, and say, "hey, we are not terrorists". While we may dismiss that, we nevertheless go more



*Scene in 'Toda Tada Teros'*



into terrorism as a form of hurting the people you love. Terrorism to strangers now becomes a little bit more trivial. It doesn't [focus on instances] when you talk about killing and wasting other people's lives, but it is not something that is worth trying to defend. Our concern is being a terrorist to people who matter to you. Eventually, it doesn't matter anymore [if you] take into account your race, or the colour of your skin. So we're not stuck in that thinking anymore. It actually terrorizes them, because they see that you label yourself as a terrorist, you accept the label of being [a] terrorist, and that alone is a form of terrorizing the person who labeled you as such. You don't try to deny it.

### **Philosophy/Accomplishments**

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**AT:** What philosophy do you bring to your film-making? What made you decide to become a film-maker, and what do you hope to accomplish with your films?

**JT:** In all my films, I want to stay brutally honest and authentic to whatever I experience from life. That means spending a lot of time being hurt, clueless about things, rebellious, angry and bitter to experience breakthroughs, swimming in your new comfort pool, and even being in awe of wondrous revelation in seemingly trivial things. It is starting with nothing and not knowing whether you will have something worth watching in the end. But because it requires a [kind of gamble], of your time, your honor and good name, it makes film-making [worthwhile]. There is no guarantee that you will have something so you try to enjoy the journey that you take. It is a test of faith and patience that requires you to be open to the signs along the way. And you try to store them to memory and just hope that it will make sense in the future. In other words, there is a constant dialogue with the images that you know and the signals of the unknown. You are always in the hunt for things to be revealed. So there should be "breakthroughs" to go to the next station. I always have scenes in mind that I want to shoot, but I have learned to throw them all away and defer to moments of illumination. Real life has a lot to offer in terms of beautiful, cinematic scenes, and I have to be ready to catch them on tape. They're beautiful and, more importantly, free. I call this parasitic cinema. Haha. Ever since high school, when we had this film appreciation class in second year, I wanted to become a movie director. I fell in love with it in an instant. Since then, I had it all planned: film courses in

college, cinematography classes and directing seminars after college, apprenticeship under an established filmmaker, and hours and hours of watching films. I want people to see that struggle has meaning. I want them to see that Jesus is Emmanuel, "God-with-us." I want them to see that there is a conspiracy of grace, an army of angels that tries its very best to battle your personal wars. I want them to see that God has a plan, and he is quite a good storyteller/maker.



*A still from 'Todo Todo Teros'*

**AT:** Will all your films involve found-footage, women, personal and semi-autobiographical material?

**JT:** It's good that you said semi-autobiographical. It's semi! Not all of those are true. But yeah, during the home stretch of editing the film, I swore, I swore that I would never undergo this process again. But, but...

**AT:** But you just told me you have a Susanne film, and a film about your father, and...

**JT:** Aah, who knows? I...don't know. This is the only way I know how to make a film.

**AT:** I personally don't see anything wrong with it. I can see it being very difficult for you personally. The films of Apichatpong\*+ are very personal, whether they are autobiographical or not, and he wants them to be that way, so much so that in the future, Apichatpong will be a character in his films, and people will go to his films to see what's new in the life of Apichatpong. And I think that's something that is very much so beginning to happen in your films. What is new in the life of John Torres?

**JT:** I used to kid my friends, "You know, if you want to know how I am, just watch my films". You get a very personal sample of what I've been going through.

**AT:** Is this something that you were fond of before you started to make your films?

**JT:** It's torture!

**AT:** No, no, before you started to make your film, was this type of cinema something you were fond of?



**JT:** To tell you the truth, I hadn't seen films with this type of treatment. Not that I'm saying that this hasn't been done, but, no...

**AT:** The closest thing that I can think of in a Philippine setting is Kidlat Tahimik, who has himself in his films, uses himself, his voiceover, as one or more characters in some of his films.

**JT:** Ah, yeah, of course. He is a very strong influence, as you know. But when making the film I didn't think about making a Kidlat Tahimik film. It just happened, and I started with my own experiences, because that's the only story I know, the only story I could tell.

### On Making Films

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**AT:** How has your girlfriend been taking the whole process?

**JT:** (laughs). Amazingly, Ina was the first person to watch the film, and it was amazing because she is such a very, very good person, and she really liked the film. She was holding me close most of the time, and would confront me honestly and directly whenever she needed clarification. That was so cool. It was a very nice experience. I was nervous, because I didn't know how she would react.

**AT:** You wanted to be a film-maker for quite some time, having apprenticed under a Filipino film-maker, Carlitos Siguion-Reyna, and you decided that you [did not want to remain] stuck in an office job; and finally made the leap, thinking: "I will make films, I will do my art, I will do what I want to do." At the time, did you know that you wanted to make personal and biographical films, or did you plan for the conventional 'make narrative, write script, and shoot' film?

**JT:** I knew I would be making films, but I didn't know how. Maybe it was because I was too impatient to write; images were rushing to my head; and I couldn't afford to wait for a good camera, actually. There were nights when I felt like exploding, I would drive out and go straight to the streets and just shoot and shoot, and I didn't know what the heck I was shooting. But I kept at it. I do what I want to do, what I've been dreaming to do, because I couldn't afford to die not making a film.

**AT:** When you started to make these films, did you already know that they would be very personal, and found footage would play a part?

**JT:** I didn't even know there was a term called "found footage". I am an outsider, really. I don't know the people within the industry. I wanted

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**"To desire the person from within, first, is just a starting point. But it's very serious. Sometimes people say, "Hey, I didn't cheat once" just because they didn't have physical contact. For me, it is [still cheating]."**

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to make something that I could show to myself, first of all, and to people who hung out with me in Los Otros, my studio in Katipunan. Just a few friends. I never dreamed I'd be showing these to strangers, to foreigners, to a larger audience, Russians, Germans.

**AT:** How did you become comfortable with the idea of showing your works to people you were not close with?

**JT:** It's getting easier. Well, it helps that you are forced to speak in front of the audience during the Q&As, and the film-maker's introduction before the [screenings]; it helps that you get those experiences. But until now, I'm still not used to strangers watching and connecting to my films. I was so amazed that people who are really [not quite like] me – white, old, gray-haired, business-like people – congratulate me, and say that they can somehow connect.

**AT:** What effect has that kind of reception and that kind of interaction with the audience had on you? Has it helped make you a braver film-maker?

**JT:** Definitely. There is hope that I can also connect to people I don't even know. It definitely makes me bolder to experiment more, which digital technology affords. They can let you play around with the medium. So it's perfect. It's a set-up that I can work freely in.

**AT:** 'Todo Todo Teros' had its World Premiere in the Singapore International Film Festival, where director Philip Cheah has been very supportive of your work. You tied with another film for the Fipresci prize. What did winning this award mean to you?

**JT:** I can never thank him enough for the belief and the faith that he has for my work. Without him and you of course, I think my DVDs would remain shelved in my workplace in Katipunan. Winning the NETPAC/FIPRESCI award meant that I am doing something right after all; that I can make a film my way; that I need not do it from script to screen, but rather, from screen to script; that I can spend more on time and personal reflection than money and financial investment. That creatively, I can retain out-of-focus shots to make clear, emphatic statements. That I can do without lighting and dollies and cranes. That I can get support from friends, who provide their talents freely. As I said in my acceptance speech, all these can serve to terrorize a

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**"Let me just say this: even with the mind you can be really unfaithful. It doesn't need to involve physical contact. Even with your desires, you can be unfaithful. I'm not saying I'm clean. But the point is that you can be unfaithful with your mind and your heart, without even touching the person [you desire]. That's where it all starts. And that's a big step actually."**

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commercially-driven system of making, acquiring, and distributing films. It is good to be reminded that I am making a difference, but I try not to dwell on the award and the certificate too much because I tend to lose track of the main point, which is to connect and make a dent in other peoples' lives.

### **On Film Distribution**

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**AT:** You've mentioned to me some radical ideas you have with regard to distributing your film locally; can you tell me more about them?

**JT:** If it weren't illegal, I would sit down and talk to the pirates, and make them my channel of distribution. They have a vast network, and they keep the prices down low. I would rather that more people see my film than make more money with a lot fewer viewers. I am quite comfortable with this idea because I – in the first place – hadn't invested millions making the film, and so I don't really have millions to lose. I have gone as far as talking to quite a few of them and asking them how much they make per DVD. It is quite interesting to get to know them and how they work.

**AT:** But if you own the rights to your film, and are selling it freely through them (the pirates), would it still be illegal? What is hindering you from going this route?

**JT:** I guess it would be okay, but I think they would argue that you are doing business with petty criminals. It's like you're dealing with the video mafia. I see the value in letting other people watch, letting the most number of people watch works that make a difference, you know. And yes, the sad reality is, how can you reach the most number of people? The video pirates have brought a lot of good films into our country.

**AT:** How much did it cost to make the film?

**JT:** Financially, the cost [hinged on] the mini-DV tapes. No crew, no lights, no meetings, nothing. So it was cheap to make. But of course, making the feature entailed a lot of turning down projects and freelance work that helped paid the bills, so in a way, it cost me a lot more than those mini-DV tapes.

**AT:** Are you considering trying to release your film commercially in the Philippines – at least on SM's digital cinemas? Do you think this is

something that Philippine audiences are ready for?

**JT:** Yes, I would love to screen on digital cinemas here. I think the movie-going public is not there yet, but I know they are in the right direction. Thank God for guys like Lav Diaz, Rox Lee, and other guerilla film-makers who are paving the way for us younger directors. Thank God for the pirates who in a way educate them with better selections of films. Thank God also for festivals sponsored by embassies, for the Hubert Bals and other foreign orgs supportive of third world film-makers. I wouldn't expect to make much from a theatre release, but I am more hopeful doing the rounds of schools and universities. ■

\* traditional coming out party and social events in the Philippines when a youth turns eighteen years old.

\*+ Apichatpong Weerasethakul is a Thai film director, whose work is characterized by unconventional narrative structures, unknown actors, and themes relating to dreams, nature, sexuality, and Western perceptions of Thailand and Asia. His features have won awards at the Cannes Film Festival, with *Sud Sanaeha* (Blissfully Yours) picking up the 2002 Un Certain Regard prize, and *Sud Pralad* (Tropical Malady) winning a Jury Prize in 2004.

## Epilouge to Interview

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Torres' films are not made out of pleasure. They aren't calculated forays into the world of film-making, and they aren't carefully-prepared stories with ideas that the maker wants to express. They were assembled from and by emotion, and it is because of this that they are best, and most often, received on an emotional level (John Torres' other works include: 'How I Can Court You Without Holding You', 'Night When Father Told Me He Had a Child Outside', 'Salat', and 'Tawidgutom').

These films were born out of pain. A hollow, aching pain that pierces the heart (it seems to leave Torres with no suitable form of release other than through his craft). One can picture the author spending many silent nights alone in his workspace repeatedly viewing the captured remnants of his past relationships (I use the term author purposely as each short's narrative is driven by the words and voice of Torres, recited to the tune of images both found and organized). It is their story (Torres and his ex-girlfriend) that provides the motivation for the trilogy, and functions as the emotional centre that ties the separate films together, creating a moving treatise on love, heartbreak, and emancipation.

The first, 'Tawidgutom', speaks of the night, longing, and distraction, as it confronts issues of pain, loss, and vulnerability. The second, 'Salat', is a series of vignettes, each separated by title, in which Torres begins to deal directly with his loss. It is in the vignette, Kulob, that he introduces us to the object of his depression. The third and final short, Kung Paano, is much more upbeat, with a jazzy score and retro-style font titles; showing us the film-maker beginning to take respite from his scenario, as he comments on the predicaments of his friends in somewhat of a video letter.



*A scene in 'Salat'*

Stripped down bare aesthetically and even more emotionally, Torres turns the video camera on and inside himself as well as those close to him, creating, through the fusion of footages, and a somber voiceover, some heartbreakingly beautiful video poems. In one particularly moving scene in the Kulob chapter of 'Salat', John and his ex-girlfriend are seen on screen, directly addressing the camera. He coerces her into a game with which she is familiar, asking her to cry on

cue. Angled perpendicularly and positioned not more than a few inches away, he stares directly at her, unflinching. She, aligned at the centre of the camera, turns slightly to meet his stare, as music from another room blares in the background. No more than a few seconds pass before her eyes begin to well up; her gaze is un-focussed, and, as the sound is muted and the images move in slow motion, tears trickle in a stream down her face. Are they genuine or phony? Real or fake? The answer becomes irrelevant; the pain of the film-maker is sincere.

It is this humble sincerity, in Torres' words, the inflection of his voice, and purity of his images, that anchors his films and renders them unique.

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Alexis A. Tioseco is the founder and editor of 'Criticine' (<http://www.criticine.com>), an online journal of Southeast Asian Cinema. A film critic and curator based in the Philippines, he has contributed to several film publications both in Asia and Europe. He was one of eight critics who participated in the Berlinale Talent Press 2005.