

Remembering Bien Lumbera

Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo

After his passing, much was said, and continues to be said, about Bienvenido Lumbera's tremendous contributions to literature, literary scholarship, and the criticism of literature, film and popular culture; about his teaching and his mentoring; about the ideals that he stood for and the causes that he fought for, steadfastly, throughout his long life.

Bien was never my teacher, although his work, particularly his pioneering critical work on Philippine Literature, has had a profound influence on my own writing and teaching. He was also my friend, and my husband Tony's friend. I am friends with his wife, Shayne and his daughter, Sining. One of my daughters is friends with one of his daughters. It is about his friendship that I wish to say something.

We first met during the heady activist days prior to the declaration of Martial law. Bien was teaching at the Ateneo, and I was teaching in UST. Tony had left his job at a multinational corporation to teach in PCC, now PUP. I was curious about this man, who had graduated from UST, but was teaching at the Ateneo. For us at UST, Ateneo was "the other place." Not very many products of the Dominican University chose to teach in the Jesuit one. But I did not get to know him well.

After martial law was declared, my husband Tony joined UNICEF, and we lived abroad for 15 years. During one of our home leaves, I learned that, in absentia, I had been made a member of MANUNURI, the film critics' organization of which Bien was a founder, and clearly remained its moving force. So, I had a reunion with Bien, and got to participate in a couple of MANUNURI deliberations, which were a learning experience for me, I had never been in any way connected to the film industry. Their decision to

make me a member was based on my having written a regular Film Review column for *Variety Magazine* (the Sunday Supplement of the Manila Times), also in the pre-Martial Law days.

One thing that Bien said in one of those meetings has remained with me. We were discussing a film which most of us did not think well of. Then Bien said quietly, “You know, the local film industry is not having an easy time of it. And the educated classes are particularly harsh on its products. I think that, as critics, our responsibility is not to keep finding fault with them. They get enough of that from others. It is to look for the good things that they do, and to point these out to the public. Our responsibility is to encourage them, and to help them improve.”

It was a new, and unfamiliar perspective. And, at first, I was not sure I agreed with it. But over time, I came to see his point, particularly with regard to Philippine arts, which, as Bien said, generally have a rough time. For, as we all know, it is not easy to earn a living through the practice of one’s art.

It was when we returned to the country for good, in 1990, and I went back to my old job in UP, that Bien and I became really good friends, as colleagues in the UP Institute of Creative Writing. Working closely together for nearly 30 years in the summer workshops in Baguio, in meetings and conferences in the old UP Faculty Center, at planning sessions in Jimmy Abad’s house in Antipolo. We have spent many long hours breaking bread, drinking wine and making merry, at countless birthday parties and literary events in Manila and other cities. I have also worked with Bien in Philippine P.E.N.

I didn’t always agree with his position on things, and Bien never pressed anyone to do so. He was unfailingly polite, sober, gracious, even-tempered, clear-minded. But he was also fun.

During our Baguio workshop, there was a time, when a bunch of us would go out every evening, after dinner at our hotel, for drinks in whichever restaurant or club this favorite band of ours—called On Call—was playing. They had a varied repertoire, which ranged from “Gethsemane” from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, to “Minsan Ang Minahal Ay Ako” from *Katy*. One evening, Bien demanded to know where we went every night. And, when we told him, he announced that he would come along. We were, of course, delighted. We arrived at the club, and the lead singer welcomed us over the mic, calling us “our friends from UP.” In turn, we introduced the National Artist in our group, and they were suitably impressed. The next time we showed up with Bien, the band had obviously done their research, for they launched into a

song from one of the plays Bien had written the libretto for. And it was Bien's turn to be impressed.

When I became director of the UP ICW, it was to Bien that I turned for guidance and advice, when there was a particularly thorny issue I had to resolve. Sometimes I would even request him to personally intervene. I knew I could always rely on his calming presence, his sense of fairness, and his wisdom. And I knew that everyone would defer to his judgment. Bien never once refused me, or disappointed me.

I was very fond of Bien. He had been my friend for almost four decades. And I have also greatly admired him. He was high-minded and steadfast, a brilliant and brave man. But he was also a kind man, patient, generous, and humorous.

So, maraming salamat, Bien, for your friendship, and for the many things you taught me, by simply being yourself. Paalam, kaibigan. ♦