

Venice Atienza about LAST DAYS AT SEA

"Somehow I wish I could be more like him"

Venice Atienza's first documentary feature closes in on 12 year old Reyboy, living in Karihatag, an isolated village in the south of the Philippines at the frontline of climate change. In 2014 Atienza visited the region with her camera, documenting how local people survive devastating storms. She promised Reyboy (and herself) to come back to capture the stories that he and the fishermen in the village had told her. But when she heard Reyboy would leave Karihatag at the end of summer to go to high school in the city, she decided to film the life he was leaving behind. *LAST DAYS AT SEA* had its virtual world premiere at the Berlinale 2021.

Its beautiful environment, its lack of aggression, its cheerfulness and its solidarity among different generations make Karihatag seem like a paradise. How to explain such a deeply humane togetherness in this seemingly uncompromising community?

Venice Atienza: Karihatag is not a paradise. In this isolated commun-

ty, people need to find ways to be self-reliant. They have a deep understanding of life's unpredictability, and have launched various systems for their community to survive, like a marine sanctuary for fishes, or protocols on how to survive storms. From the people of Karihatag, I understood how survival is not just an individual endeavour; it also depends on systems and structures. Many aspects, like the sea getting rougher all the time because of climate change, are beyond their control; they can't deal with it on their own. These are issues that need to be addressed by us, who are not locals. This situation concerns us too, even if we don't feel the effects as strongly as they do.

What do you really want to achieve with this film?

Atienza: I hope *LAST DAYS AT SEA* can make clear how the world's bigger issues also shape people's individual lives. I do not only feel sadness over Reyboy leaving home, but also a deep rage. Not having access to education, facilities, and stable employment, is

the reason why he and the other kids from Karihatag have to leave home at such an early age. Most of them go to study in nearby cities like Butuan, Cabadbaran, Surigao. These are decisions that more privileged people do not have to make. We all dream of wandering into the world, discovering new places, but there is a big difference between making a journey because you want to or because you have to.

I feel a deep intimacy between you and Reyboy.

Atienza: At some point Reyboy told me that he felt uncomfortable being observed and filmed when being alone with me. We honoured his request. Making a film about his last days at home, it was important to have him acting the way he would normally do. Reyboy loved to spend time near the shore at night, so with the crew we decided that when hanging out at the shore, we would not be filming, but only recording the sound of him and me, talking as individuals. Not many of those conversations



LAST DAYS AT SEA

A FILM BY VENICE ATIENZA

PRODUCED BY SWIMMING FILM PRODUCTIONS - A FILM OF THE 71ST CANNES FILM FESTIVAL

PRODUCED BY WU & ATIENZA IN ASSOCIATION WITH MOSHE LASSANA & KARIN MAMA ESCA

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: VENICE ATIENZA & MOSHE LASSANA EDITORS: VENICE ATIENZA & TAN WU

IN ASSOCIATION WITH CHENG CHOU COLLEGE MOSHE LASSANA PRODUCED BY CLAUDIO UBUAGAO PRODUCTION DESIGNER: JENNIFER LACAMAN





What did you personally pick up from the people of Karihatag?

Atienza: First and foremost, they showed me that to survive life's difficulties, we need others. I suppose I always knew that, but in difficult times I used to wonder how I could survive - taking into consideration what I needed most. In Karihatag, when the going gets tough – like when storms are coming or when a neighbour runs out of food – I saw people offering help, not only out of a sense of duty but because they truly care. Helping each other is not a romantic deed, it is at the very basis of survival. Reyboy is the type of guy who says what he thinks; when he is sad about something, he will tell you. He is curious about nature and about what lies

beyond our world. He is considerate because he knows how difficult life can be. He is carefree but at the same time, he understands how precious everything and everyone is. Somehow I wish I could be more like him.

Memories are taking an important place in your film.

Atienza: Our story is like a matryoshka doll. While constructing this "time capsule" (Reyboy's last days at home) I began to unearth things that I didn't know I had forgotten. When Reyboy told me his biggest wish, I realised that at some point in my life, I had dreams as big as his, but as I grew older, I learned to dream less and less. When spending time with him watching the stars and clouds, I



re-discovered how to really look at things around me. I'm not sure if he is aware of that. The time spent with Reyboy reminded me to hold on to all things precious, because one day, everything will become a memory. That is on the other end of survival. I hold on to things because I want to keep them forever, but to hold on to precious things means to take care of what is here, while it is here, because all things eventually will be gone one day.

You're also involved in a distribution project called Cinecaravan.

Atienza: Cinecaravan is actually a project by our colleagues in the DocNomads Master Degree in Documentary Filmmaking (Erasmus Mundus) where

my producer Fan Wu and I met as students. Cinecaravan screens films in small communities, where they also organise filmmaking workshops. The programme has already travelled to Portugal and Hungary, and inspired Fan and me. Now we hope to adopt the Cinecaravan concept and bring it to our side of the world, to the Philippines and Taiwan. We're hoping to screen our film in different coastal communities. Due to the pandemic, the plan was put on hold, but we haven't given up on our dream.

Are you ready now to share your film with the world?

Atienza: It took us a long time to finish LAST DAYS AT SEA, as if the film required me to grow up and become the director it needed me to be. The whole experience touched something deep inside me; now I hope that we can share with others what it felt like to get to know Reyboy and the people of Karihatag.

–
Uta Beth