

NARCISA B. VDA. DE LEON
(1877-1966)

“Grand Old Lady of Philippine Movies”

Known as “Doña Sisang,” Narcisa de Leon was the “Grand Old Lady” of the Philippine movie industry. The family-owned L.V.N. pictures, Inc., which she headed as president, was a pillar of local filmmaking, producing big stars, and helping popularize Tagalog movies.

Doña Sisang was born on October 29, 1877 to Justo Buencamino and Anastacia Lim in San Miguel, Bulacan. She was very young when her father died. Being the oldest child, she learned to cope with the demands of daily living rather early. Even in her teens, she was already a good cook and could bake, sew and do embroidery work. She even went into the umbrella business. In her leisure, she learned to ride a horse.

Her frequent and varied contacts with people from all walks of life hastened her maturity, gaining useful insights into human nature and, at the same time, enriching her innate managerial ability. The Christian teachings and moral values she had imbibed and practiced in the process of growing up explain why she remained humane, humble and philanthropic throughout her life in the face of her almost unbelievable success in business.

In 1904, she married a former *capitan municipal* of San Miguel, Jose de Leon. She bore him five children: Florencia, Encarnacion, Pelagio (who died in infancy), Manuel, and Amanda (Mrs. Bienvenido Eraña). Her marriage with Don Pepe proved to be a very fruitful conjugal partnership, in both domestic and economic affairs. The couple’s realty business prospered. They acquired properties of substantial value in Bulacan, Manila and other parts of the metropolis. In 1929, they donated a hospital in their hometown. It was named Doña Eladia Memorial Hospital, in honor of Don Pepe’s mother.

Through the astute management of Doña Sisang, the De Leon’s economic success continued even after the death of Don Pepe in 1934. In fact, as many people observed, their real estate business soared to its highest peak after his death.

In 1938, her friends asked Doña Sisang to invest in the movie industry. She was elected president of L.V.N. Pictures, Inc., in 1940. Through her stewardship, it became the primary company to popularize Philippine movies. It was in this field that her prominence spread throughout the country. The name “Doña Sisang” became a household word, revered as the marker of the screen gods and goddesses idolized by the masses. She was the first to introduce color cinematography in the Philippines. The film *Ibong Adarna* was the first Filipino film with color sequences.

As the movie producer, Doña Sisang was the recipient of a number of awards of recognition, to wit: 1941 – Carlos P. Romulo Award, for the technique and artistry of “Ibong Adarna”; 1949 – “Trend Public Opinion Award,” for her outstanding accomplishment in the movie industry; 1950 – “Maria Clara Award,” for best producer; “National Federation of Women’s Club Award,” for her outstanding contribution to the movie industry; 1951 – “Katipunang Pambansa ni Plaridel Award,” for the propagation of the national language through the movies; 1956 – Best Producer Award for “Anak Dalita,” and “Special Presidential Citation,” for the same picture; and 1960 – “Presidential Merit Award,” for her outstanding contribution to the movie industry. She was also the first Filipino film producer to make a co-production venture with a foreign movie company (I Indonesia) and with Hollywood.

In recognition of her managerial talents, President Mauel L. Quezon named Doña Sisang as a founder and director of the National Rice and Corn Corporation (NARIC) when it was organized in 1936. Even after her husband's death, when her career as a businesswoman was at its zenith, Doña Sisang remained close to the simple folk, sharing with them her blessings.

In 1962, she donated a school building worth P35,000 to San Miguel, Bulacan in memory of her late husband. In another instance, she and her children contributed a large sum of money for the renovation of San Miguel Church. She also funded several orphanages and other charitable institutions.

Doña Sisang is remembered best for her simplicity in dress and manner even at lavish receptions and parties tendered in her honor by her affluent friends. This endeared her more to the public. On such occasions, whenever the speaker would shower her with praises for her accomplishments, she would immediately remark with her typical shyness: "Naku, ayoko ng ganyan. Huwag ninyo akong purihin."

To Doña Sisang, whatever riches she earned in life was but a debt to God, her Creator, to whom they should be dedicated.

Doña Sisang died on February 6, 1966, three months after her 88th birthday.

References:

Ancheta, Herminiana M. and Michaela Beltran-Gonzalez, Filipino Women in Nation Building, Quezon City : Phoenix Press, Inc., 1984.

Manuel, E. Arsenio. Dictionary of Philippine Biography. Quezon City: Filipiniana Publications, 1995.

Varias-De Guzman, Jovita, et. al., editorial board. Women of Distinction (Biographical Essays on Outstanding Filipino Women of the Past and the Present) Philippines: Bukang Liwayway, 1947.