



The blossoming of Maximo Oliveros

Director: **Auraeus Solito**

Country: **Philippines**

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A review by Keith Uhlich for *slantmagazine.com*:

Like any good diva, 12-year-old Maximo Oliveros (Nathan Lopez) has a killer wardrobe, an assortment of sandals, shirts, and shorts—all a mish-mash of blinding pastels—topped off by strategically placed floral headwear. The outfit of the moment is the first thing you notice, but what sticks with you is the walk.



Maximo's legs, spindly and flexible, are always one step ahead of the rest of him, while his hips, acting as a sort of metronomic balance, sway deliriously and fetchingly to and fro. He's what the bullies of the world would call, on a euphemistic day, "limp-wristed" (like Fosse-era Liza Minnelli, high on life instead of drugs) and so defiantly true to himself (like a preteen Anacleto, eagerly prepping for the garden shear neuroses of *Reflections in a Golden Eye*) that you can't help but admire his tenacity. And by the time he flashes that toothy grin—*joie de vivre* captured in a profoundly singular mannerism—it's love, dahlia, love: head over heels.

Shot on digital video in the slums of Manila, *The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros* is a lo-fi Technicolor ode to this memorable protagonist, a neorealist homo noir primarily concerned with Maximo's burgeoning crush on Victor (JR Valentin), the policeman investigating a murder committed by one of Maximo's older brothers. Victor is more bemused by Maximo's attentions than anything, though there remains—up to and including the film's tragicomic final image—a consistently erotic charge to their relationship that is rather remarkably nonchalant. It is one of the great taboos, particularly in Western culture, to seriously consider the developing sexual feelings of children, a subject most easily infantilized, sensationalized, or brushed under the carpet, lest one become an unwitting Megan's Law pariah. What's often lost in this swirl of knee-jerk "adult" protectiveness are the feelings of the child, which—raw though they may be—deserve to be included in the discussion rather than subsumed by argumentation.

It is to director Auraeus Solito and screenwriter Michiko Yamamoto's credit that they view their characters through a quietly revolutionary queer perspective, portraying Maximo's pursuit of Victor, childish though it may be, as a fervently religious quest. In an early church-set scene Maximo silently spies on Victor as he prays. The young boy's eyes flicker back and forth with a mixture of excitement and paranoia, moving between the object of his affection and the cathedral's main altar, a highly loaded image that effectively melds the sexual and the spiritual—as the voyeur watches, so is he watched. And in the movie's centerpiece sequence Maximo tends to Victor's bloodied body (the result of a fistfight with the boy's father and brothers), gently washing his wounds as if attending to his own personal Christ figure, an insightful visual encapsulation of the tenderly obsessive qualities of first love.



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