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A Filipino Grandmother Grimm: Subversion of Foreign Fairy Tales through Indigenization and Cultural Appropriation in Mga Kuwento ni Lola Basyang (The Stories of Grandmother Basyang)

Rhoda Myra Garces-Bacsal, Ruanni Tupas
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Introduction: The Role of Magic and Fairy Stories in Children's Lives

Bettelheim wrote a treatise in 1975 on the uses of enchantment to stimulate a child's mind and facilitate personality development. According to him, the child is able to derive coherence from the turmoil of his or her inner feelings and understand abstract ethical concepts more viscerally through fairy tales. Apart from providing children an escape and a means through which they can find resource in their inner world, Jack Zipes suggested that fairy tales "play a crucial role in the socialization of children over much of the modern world" (110). Fairy tales are also said to function as a "safekeeper of desires" (Hohr 101), as they allow children to develop their social and emotional competence in the face of harsh reality.

More recent research studies point to fairy tales serving as a roadmap helping children find their "pathway to love, power and privilege, while at the same time pointing the way back to safety and serenity of their home" (Tsitsani, et al. 267). Anthony

Zehetner emphasized the relevance of fairy tales to a modernized twenty-first-century society, even more so with the many social ills and rapid shifts in global realities that contemporary children need to navigate.

This kind of personal illumination and self-insight becomes more textured and complex when juxtaposed against a long and tumultuous history of colonialism, disempowerment, and the loss of one's voice in a developing country like the Philippines. Reclaiming this power and taking back one's voice through an indigenization of foreign fairy tales lie at the very core of the *Stories of Lola Basyang* (1925), through which seemingly-innocuous fantasies from the West are painstakingly removed from its context, reconfigured with locally subversive elements and dispositions, and indigenized to redefine Filipino identity. They serve as subtle means through which the so-called colonial subjects navigate the difficult and painful terrains of colonial life (generally referring to more than three centuries of continuities of

Spanish and American colonialism and, specifically, to American colonial rule in the first four decades of the twentieth century), where open resistance to foreign rule could pose real dangers to the lives of the subjugated. Thus, cultural strategies of appropriation serve as “weapons of the weak” (Scott), testifying to the dynamic identity work and formation among the colonized amidst structures of unfreedom.

Contextualizing Lola Basyang

Severino Reyes, a revolutionary playwright better known as the Father of Tagalog Plays, began publishing *Mga Kuwento ni Lola Basyang* in 1925 for the weekly magazine *Liwayway*. Initially intended as a filler for the magazine, *Lola Basyang* became so popular that it was turned into a regular weekly column—amassing a total of five hundred fairy tales written by Reyes’ death in 1942 (Gutierrez).

Reyes was inspired by the image of a grandmother sitting in her rocking chair, her betel-nut box nearby, gathering together the children in the household after dinner and telling them tales of magic and enchantment. This became the indigenous storytelling template in which the *Lola Basyang* stories were framed (see Figure 1).

Although fluent in Spanish, Reyes deliberately wrote the stories in Tagalog to reach a much wider Filipino audience. During the colonial and early postcolonial period (that is, after the Philippines ‘gained’ its political independence from the United States in the 1940s)—and even up to the present time—having access to beautifully-illustrated, gilt-edged, leather-bound fairy tale books from the West is indicative of a person’s wealth and high standing in society. Reyes created a local portal to these foreign tales by transforming them, thereby owning them, and distributing them in a cheap, easily-accessible format as read through his weekly columns in a Filipino magazine. He imbued the foreign fairy tales with social tensions and realities from within a local context. He overtly inverted the balance of power by allowing the underdog to prevail, giving a voice to the silenced in most of his tales.

Our choice of *Lola Basyang* strategically positions our paper as a contemporary response to interlocking economic, cultural, and sociopolitical conditions and structures that continue to shape the production and consumption of children’s stories in the Philippines. To paraphrase Filipino writer and critic Eugene Evasco, while the political economy and culture of reading connive to make reading in general an inaccessible cultural practice to most Filipinos, Filipino children’s literature is a sophisticated art and business to those who patronize it. The quality of writing has improved dramatically, and even the number of children’s books published has increased yearly, especially in recent years (Evasco 106-7). The challenge now is how to consolidate an aesthetics and a politics of Philippine children’s literature, in light of the fact that this particular genre clearly has colonial and foreign imprints. Moreover, there is, admittedly, still always the danger of children’s stories being deployed to perpetuate social inequalities and dominant harmful ideologies (Fernandez; Rogers and Christian). This paper helps to recover the stories of *Lola Basyang* from their colonial moorings and reframe them as subversive or decolonizing texts which, in turn, complicate the historical project of Filipino identity-making as seen through children’s literature as an appropriating indigenous practice.

The original context of the *Lola Basyang* stories was, generally, the imperialist milieu of the first four decades of twentieth-century Philippines and, specifically, the contested colonial governance of the



Figure 1

United States. Both the general and specific contexts of imperialist rule need to be emphasized here because, while indeed this was the time of the American colonization of the Philippines, in essence, the country was merely experiencing a continuation of foreign imperialist rule that stretched back more than three centuries. Before the United States violently flexed its muscles upon the Philippine archipelago through the much-forgotten Philippine-American War of 1898-1902, the Philippines was governed by Spain for 333 years. In the last years of the nineteenth century, Filipinos were winning the war against Spain and, in 1898, declared their independence from Spanish rule. However, through what has been known as the Treaty of Paris of 1898, and mainly because it did not want to surrender to its erstwhile colonial subjects, Spain ceded the country to the Americans for the amount of \$20,000,000 on December 10, 1898 (Pomeroy). Thus, the much-fought independence movement suffered a major blow when the United States, by sheer economic and military might, “took over” the Philippines from Spain (Tupas).

The point here is that, while there would certainly be radical differences between the colonial structures of governance of Spain and the United States, nevertheless, the cultural dominance of Spanish rule was very much embedded in Filipino life at the time of American rule. American-Filipino elite collaboration and rule was such that those who immediately changed allegiance from Spain to the United States were actually the Spanish-speaking Filipino elite who needed to protect their political and economic positions which they enjoyed during the time of Spanish colonization. Severino Reyes himself was fluent in Spanish, thus his use of Tagalog in the *Lola Basyang* stories was not only a way to penetrate the sensibilities of the Filipino masses but also could be interpreted as a resistance to the languages of imperialism (Spanish and English). Thus, culturally, this would explain why the *Lola Basyang* stories would feature clearly Spanish influences, for example, clothing representing imperialist rule. In other words, the subtle anti-imperialist tropes of *Lola Basyang* stories did not have a clearly American or Spanish face; they could be viewed generally as voices against foreign domination.

Method of Analysis

The tales by Severino Reyes were written for a wider audience, including adults. The *Lola Basyang* stories were then aired on the radio in the 1950s, appeared in comic book form, were transformed into a play, and served as basis for television dramas and for film—even before the term “transmedia” was coined (Rodrigues and Bidarra). Gilda Cordero-Fernando rewrote twelve of the stories for children for the first time in 1997 (see Reyes) and published them in a thick 246-page tome. The most recent retelling of *Lola Basyang* for children was written by Christine S. Bellen, published from 2004 to 2011. Bellen’s stories were selected for examination here because each story was published individually in a thirty-two-page storybook that is sold for 82 PHP each (around 1.50 USD)—rendering the books more accessible to the larger public and, thus, presumably wider in their reach.

Katrina Gutierrez’s examination of Bellen’s *Lola Basyang* retelling explored the dialectic between the global and the local culture in picture books and how a glocal identity is formed in the Filipino child through the stories. Our paper departs from this kind of reading by grounding our analysis with an indigenization approach to *Lola Basyang*, our point being that the retelling continues to navigate the country’s unending quest for decolonizing national identity formation, subverted many times throughout the country’s struggle for independence, both from colonial and neocolonial influences. Moreover, while Gutierrez only highlighted four stories in her analysis, this paper attempts to do a grounded analysis of the predominant themes in the narratives across all the twenty books that Bellen published from 2004 to 2011 (see Appendix A for the complete list of stories). The first five stories published in 2004 are all written in Tagalog with a one-paged English translation found at the end of the book. The subsequent fifteen stories are bilingual.

We analyzed the twenty stories individually in relation to their characters and setting, predominant themes, illustrations/art, and the main conflicts noted in the tales. An iterative analysis was done as we moved back and forth across each of the tales with new emerging themes noted and observed in subsequent stories until a point of saturation was reached whereby no new themes are noted (Creswell). For the purposes of this paper, only emergent themes

that are relevant to decolonization and indigenization are included. These themes are (1) didacticism, subversion, and the politics of fairy tales; (2) greed and disfigurement; and lastly, (3) cultural appropriation and indigenization of Western fairy tales.

Didacticism, Subversion, and the Politics of Fairy Tales

– *Gather round me now and be quiet, for my story is about to begin ...*

In the foreword written by the publishers of Cordero-Fernando's 1970s retelling of Lola Basyang, it was noted how Reyes would always incorporate lessons in his stories: "Reyes always used to say that all stories must teach readers a lesson—otherwise the writer had no business writing at all!" (13). While the moralistic and didactic tone in children's literature has been decried as infantilizing and old-fashioned, librarians and children's literature experts acknowledge that there are stories that can be both subversive and moralistic at the same time—such as the German story *Struwelpeter* and Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith's *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (Bird, Danielson, & Sieruta). In the first place, we also take Raylene Ramsay's contention that "all art has often unstated didactic purposes" (43). Moralism or didacticism is a political act and typically responds to a whole gamut of issues and experiences saturating a particular social milieu, and it is therefore not intrinsically undesirable; in other words, it can also become a decolonizing act if it is "political and disruptive, challenging worldviews and systems of power" (Ramsay 43). In some cases, didacticism is an imperative "in order to be heard or seen" (44).

The *Lola Basyang* stories are rich with this fusion of subversion and didacticism with morals that are discernible and often articulated in the narratives. However, the lessons serve more as voices of empowerment and a redefinition of one's often-unfair realities, providing the oppressed with tools (albeit mostly magical and make-believe) to improve their life circumstances. Through magical intervention, the protagonists obtain some form of social justice from greedy villains who are usually in positions of power and authority.

Most of the stories we examined follow the trope of an impoverished character that shows compassion to one who is even more unfortunate than he or she is, thereby gaining magical means to solve problems

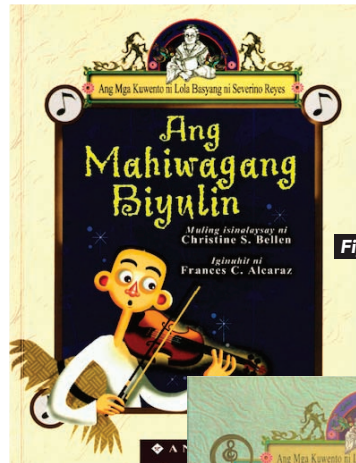


Figure 2



Figure 3

or carry out a quest. An example of this can be seen in *Ang Mahiwagang Biyulin* (The Enchanted Violin) (see Figure 2), where Rodrigo, the downtrodden protagonist, gives his last piece of bread to an old beggar who, in turn, gives him an enchanted violin that becomes the key for him to reclaim what is rightfully his from his master Ahab, a rich and greedy businessman who had refused to give Rodrigo his two years' worth of salary.

The same story thread is evident in *Ang Plautin ni Periking* (Periking's Flute) (see Figure 3), which incidentally was the very first story published by Severino Reyes in *Liwayway Magazine*. This is the story of three orphaned brothers, Berto, Tolo, and Periking. The youngest brother, Periking, has a wooden toy boat that gets stuck in the mouth of an enchanted fish. When the two older brothers assist him in freeing the fish, the latter gives the two older brothers magical objects that afford them special powers. As Periking is left alone while his two older brothers go to find their fortune, an old bearded man appears to Periking warning him that his brothers are in danger

and gives him a white blanket that will grant him whatever his heart desires, a magic hat that strikes lightning if he says the Lord's name in vain (this is in reference to the Roman Catholic's Ten Commandments), and a flute that could make anyone dance. He uses the said magical objects to free a group of young men, including his brothers, from a *Gobernador* who had imprisoned them to take away their magical powers.

In *Periking's Flute* (see Fig. 4) and *The Enchanted Violin* (see Fig. 5), there is an obvious mockery of the superior social status of the Gobernador and Ahab the businessman as their dignity is undermined by their uncontrollable dancing brought about, respectively, by the enchanted flute and violin. The illustrations also depict Ahab and the Gobernador like Spanish *conquistadores* (conquerors) in the late 1800s with all their fineries and accouterments signifying power, taking advantage of the weak and powerless *Indios* (natives) who are outfitted in simple ragged clothing. Yet, their authority is supplanted and mocked through their uncontrollable dancing, consolidating the work of mockery and subversion as inextricable literary strategies (Torlone 78-107).

Very much a characterization of imperialist behavior (Foster and McChesney) which served as the sociopolitical canvas against which the stories were written, both villains are portrayed as preying on the weak, taking advantage of the protagonists' lowly status and inability to defend themselves (as is the case of Rodrigo in *The Enchanted Violin*), or attempting to steal their magical powers (as is the case in *Periking's Flute*, where the Gobernador locked up all the young men with special powers in a tower). These two stories can clearly be regarded as allegorical tales of the *Indio* or "native" Filipino reclaiming his or her power from the greedy colonizers or Western hegemony as a whole.

Of Greed and Disfigurement

Other examples of moral lessons that are discernible in the stories but still may be viewed as allegories of the rapacity of colonialism and the capitalist ideologies that accompanied it (Bradford; Nodelman) include *Ang Parusa ng Duwende* (The Dwarf's Punishment) (see Figure 6), where the greedy and duplicitous master of a poor young boy is punished by a dwarf and driven into madness; *Alamat ng Lamok* (The Legend of the Mosquito) (see Figure 7), where an entire town is punished by a giant with the birth of blood-sucking insects that thrive on filth and disarray because of the people's inability to take care of their environment; and *Ang Kapatid ng Tatlong Marya* (The Brother of the Three Marias) (see Figure 8),



Figure 5



Figure 4

in which a woodcutter/folk healer is punished with the loss of his three daughters for his greed when he cuts down the *kolesmeloko* tree that gave him sustenance and life. In *Ang Palasyo ng mga Duwende* (see Figure 9), the stepmother and stepsister's envy and greed prove to be their undoing—an indigenous twist to both “Cinderella” and “Little Snow-White,” which will be discussed below.

[The Prince of the Birds]) (see Figure 12). These heroes can either transform into a man or an enchanted creature as seen in *The Prince of the Birds*, or they may be redeemed through extraordinary heroic deeds (as seen in the case of the tiny *Pandakotyong*), bathing in the Jordan river (Ang Prinsipeng Unggoy [*The Monkey Prince*]) (see Figure 13), or love's true kiss (Ang Mahiwagang Kuba – *The Enchanted Hunchback*) (see fig. 14). The skills and strengths of the protagonists in these five stories are undermined by virtue of their deformity.

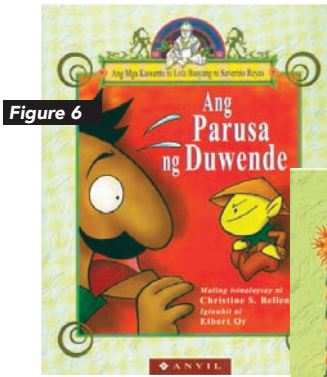


Figure 6



Figure 7

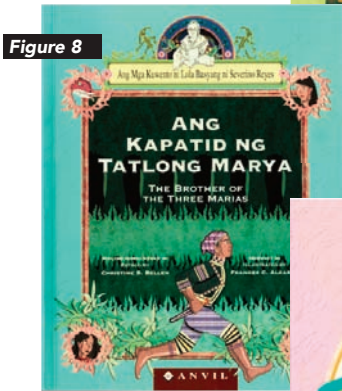


Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14

Another life lesson imparted to the reader is not to judge people by their appearances, with a not-so-subtle call for greater kindness and compassion. Five out of the twenty stories present disfigured heroes who are either born with their deformity (*Si Pandakotyong* [Pandakotyong]) (see Figure 10), have been cursed by witches and wizards (*Ang Prinsipeng Mahaba ang Ilong* [The Prince with the Long Nose]) (see Figure 11), or are shapeshifters (*Ang Prinsipe ng mga Ibon*

In *Ang Prinsipeng Unggoy* (The Monkey Prince), the protagonist in the story is born with a monkey-like appearance after his parents, in desperation, prayed for a child even if he turned out as ugly as a monkey. Ridiculed because of his appearance, the Monkey Prince travels aboard a ship to Greece where he learns about a Princess who was imprisoned in the middle of the sea by her Father. It was foretold that the Princess would bring shame and bad luck to the Kingdom, hence her banishment. Armed with heroism, good faith, and blind love, the Monkey Prince takes it upon himself to rescue the Princess only to be disparaged by the King of Greece, who regards him as a disgrace and an embarrassment, unfit for his daughter (see Fig. 15).



Figure 15

This character's trajectory could once again be perceived as an allegorical representation of the *Indio* not knowing his place in the world, trying to rise above his stature. Filipinos have been described as little brown monkeys by Western colonizers (Slotkin) or, more broadly, as *savages* especially in order to “justify seizure of the islands and repression of the indigenous independence movement in the Philippines” (845). Advised by his dead mother in a dream, the Monkey Prince is eventually transformed into a handsome figure by bathing in the River Jordan. He marries and takes the Greek Princess back to his Philippine hometown, further suggesting that he was never really accepted by his wife's (racist) family despite his changed appearance.

Cultural Appropriation and Indigenization of Western Fairy Tales

There is a polyphony of influences from the Spaniards, Japanese, Americans, Chinese, Malays, and Indians intermeshed with indigenous and animistic roots woven into the multivocality of stories in a colonized country like the Philippines. This is what Reyes attempts to capture through *Lola Basyang* and

his fearless appropriation of fairy tales that will establish resonances with the common folk's sensibility.

Ang Palasyo ng mga Duwende (The Palace of the Dwarves) is one example of such an amalgamation of fairy tales—with traces of “Little Snow-White” and “Cinderella” from *The Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, illustrated by Arthur Rackham and published in 1901, thrown into an ethnic mix. In this story, one identifies parallels to “Cinderella” with the wealthy widowed father who remarries a woman who also has a daughter of her own. The illustrations used in Bellen's 2007 adaptation of *Lola Basyang*, however, deviate from the traditional Eurocentric garb with the characters outfitted in precolonial attire and the women's near-naked bodies covered in tattoos (see Fig. 16).



Figure 16

While the girls are described as having grown up in peaceful coexistence during the first few years, the stepmother and stepsister are overtaken with jealousy when they observe how Yani is growing more beautiful each day. The stepmother gets rid of Yani's father and claims that he simply disappeared while they were taking a stroll outside the town. Following the father's disappearance, Yani is treated like a servant. Not too long thereafter, Yani's stepsister Lotta, also invites her to take a stroll outside of town, asks her to play tag, then pushes Yani off the cliff with every intention of killing her. Unlike its European counterparts, in this tale one could discern how active a role both stepmother and stepsister play in ensuring the demise of the main characters. Of course, Yani does not die as she is rescued by dwarves. Once in the Palace of the Dwarves, Yani sees that her father is in a glass casket, under the spell of the Queen of the Fairies and trapped in an enchanted sleep (see Fig. 15).



Figure 17

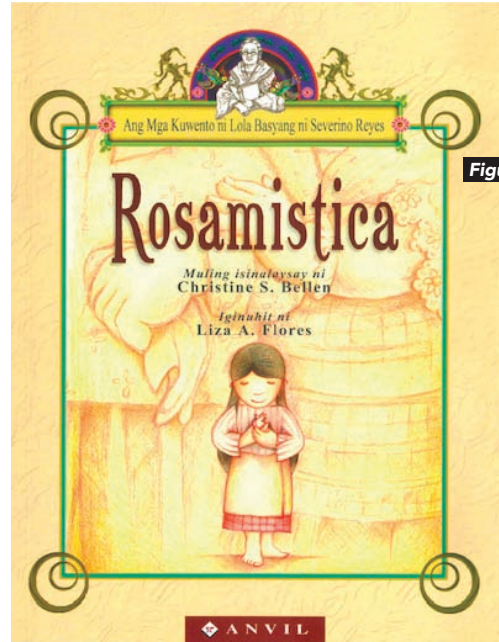


Figure 18

Elements of “Little Snow-White” could now be seen despite the absence of a magic vanity mirror and a powerful witch stepmother. The dwarf then advises Yani, “Yani, that bird flew in to bathe in the Stream of Life. When it returns you must wipe the water dripping from its body with a handkerchief. Dab the wet handkerchief on your father to remove the Queen’s spell”.

In this story, the reader sees a female protagonist who is clearly the heroine of the story as she strives to save her father’s life. It turns out that the beautiful bird is an enchanted prince also cursed by the Queen of Fairies. When Yani plucks a long feather from his tail, he becomes Prince Beni-Hamad and is subsequently brought to the Prince’s Kingdom with her father, and they all lived happily ever after. More than a role-reversal and a fusion of popular fairy tales, the story introduces new elements while removing others. Yani, the female, near-naked hero, who is pure in her intentions, takes charge of her situation and changes the course of her life by having a strong sense of self-agency. Lack of space prevents us from delving deep into the political and ideological lineage of Yani as a decolonizing character, but it is worth noting here that throughout the country’s struggle for independence, the image and ideology of *Inang Bayan* (literally, “Mother Country”) would figure prominently as a rallying trope for the Filipinos’ earnest desire for self-determination (Roces).

Other *Lola Basyang* stories show resonances of influence from other well known or recognizable fairy tales, such as *Ang Prinsipeng Mahaba ang Ilong* (The Princess Who Has a Long Nose reminiscent of “Pinocchio,”) see Figure 11) and the Cinderella-esque *Rosamistica* (see Figure 18), but similarly, they are represented not simply through a bricolage of cultural and

literary influences but, more cuttingly and crucially perhaps, through a reclaiming of silenced voices and agency.

Conclusion

The intricate relationship between colonialism and children’s stories has been well-documented, with many scholars arguing that children’s stories emerging out of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries betray “a pattern of imperial culture” (Bradford 196; also McGillis). Pushing this line of thinking to one particular conclusion, other scholars do indeed operate “from the premise that children’s literature is a form of colonialism” (Nodelman 29), constitutive of “imperialist activities” (33).

Decolonizing texts, however, such as the whole set of *Lola Basyang* stories, are “marked by a more complex and contradictory set of discursive practices” (Bradford 197). Space constraints prevent us from exploring more deeply specific issues and strategies deployed by the stories to deliver subtle messages of resistance amidst the reality of cooption and hegemonic rule. However, in broad strokes, we hope to have highlighted several emergent themes and strategies in the stories—strategies that highlight *Lola Basyang’s* participation in a Filipino project of decolonization and cultural appropriation. We see in these tales the punishment of greed with capitalistic un-

dertones, the mockery of the ruling political class's excesses of authority, the ascribing of agency and self-determination to society's weak and marginalized, and the denunciation of racism in intercultural contact. The Philippines' quest for self-determination has been described by some scholars as an unfinishable revolution (Hau), implying that the decolonizing project that has galvanized the nation through the many decades after political independence from the United States in 1945 continues to be a work-in-progress. Yet it is indeed in the unfinishability of the revolution for self-determination that we always find hope in the struggle and its success. *Lola Basyang* and her stories—retold many times amidst the onslaught of profit-driven writing and the business of writing for consumers of Disneyfied versions of folktales and in a global culture that devalues reading in general—remind us that Filipino identity is constantly being remade and we actually have an active role in shaping it and claiming ownership over it.



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**APPENDIX A: 20 Retold Stories of Lola Basyang
written by Christine S. Bellen.**

	Title	Illustrator	Year of Publication
Filipino (with translation on last page)			
01	Ang Mahiwagang Biyulin	Frances Alcaraz	2004
02	Rosamistica	Liza Flores	2004
03	Ang Alamat ng Lamok	Ruben De Jesus	2004
04	Ang Plautin ni Periking	Albert Gamos	2004
05	Ang Parusa ng Duwende	Elbert Or	2004
Bilingual (in text)			
06	Ang Binibining Tumalo sa Mahal na Hari	Elbert Or	2005
07	Ang Prinsipeng Mahaba ang Ilong	Liza A. Flores	2005
08	Ang Prinisipe ng mga Ibon	Frances Alcaraz	2005
09	Si Pandakotyong	Albert Gamos	2005
10	Ang Prinsipeng Duwag	Ruben de Jesus	2005
11	Ang Kapatid ng Tatlong Marya	Frances Alcaraz	2007
12	Ang Palasyo ng mga Duwende	Albert Gamos	2007
13	Angting-anting	Hubert Fucio	2007
14	Ang Pitong Tanga	Ruben de Jesus	2007
15	Ang Sultan Saif	Liza Flores	2007
16	Ang Pag-ibig ni Maryang Sinukuan	Blooey Singson	2011
17	Labindalawang Masasayang Prinsesa	Abi Goy	2011
18	Ang Mahiwagang Kuba	Sergio Bumatay	2011
19	Pedrong Walang Takot	Martin Malabanan	2011
20	Ang Prinsipeng Unggoy	Herbert Fucio	2011



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