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**SPEECH BY PRESIDENT FERDINAND R. MARCOS JR. AT THE CONFERMENT OF THE
PRESIDENTIAL MEDAL OF MERIT TO FILIPINO CULTURAL ICONS**

[Delivered at the Ceremonial Hall, Malacañan Palace, Manila | 04 May 2025]

Maraming, maraming salamat. Babatiin ko lang po ang – nakikita niyo po ang ating dating first lady, First Lady Imelda Romualdez Marcos na siguro sa lahat ng first lady sa kasaysayan ng Pilipinas, siya ang kinikilala na nagsuporta sa all of the arts, all of the creatives in the time that she was the first lady. *[applause]*

Marami sa pagkakila sa Pilipinas... Ngayon ang reputasyon ng Pilipinas talagang basta't music, basta't ganyang klaseng performance art, kilalang-kilala na ang Pilipino na sikat at naiba. Hindi lang pangkaraniwan.

Hindi lang 'yung iba-ibang Pilipino, kung hindi lahat ng Pilipino ay may talent. At magpapasalamat kami lahat – because I'm a frustrated musician myself – for the support that my mother Imelda gave to the artists all through the years, and it has made the Philippines well-known and well-recognized around the world. *[applause]*

The National Commission for Culture and Arts Chairman Victorino Mapa Manalo; the – we'll greet the Executive Secretary Chief Lucas Bersamin; *[nandito ba si Senator Grace? Well, anyway...]*; the loved ones of our four renowned and beloved Presidential Medal of Merit Awardees; *[applause]* ladies and gentlemen.

Isang magandang gabi po sa inyong lahat.

There are moments in our history when we, as a nation, remember our finest moments of beauty – in the beauty of a song, or a poignant scene from a film, or the taste of a dish that reminds us of home.

Tonight, we remember those who made those moments possible and made each memory brighter, more vivid with their craft and passion.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are here to honor four outstanding individuals who, though they have passed from our world, continue to shape our art, our cinema, our music, and our culinary landscape.

These are the proud bearers of many aspects of our culture: Ms. Gloria Romero, Gaita Forés, Pilita Corrales, Ms. Nora Aunor. *[applause]*

They are undeniably icons. But more importantly, we can see that the true quality of their art, of their performances came from the core of them being Filipino. They are women who spent their lives sharing their gifts, deepening how we understand ourselves through their respective disciplines.

Ang kanilang sining at likha ay hindi lamang naging aliwan ng ating mga kababayan, bagkus naging salamin ng kasaysayan ng bansa [at] ng bawat Pilipino.

The Presidential Medal of Merit, created under Executive Order 236 in 2003, was designed for evenings such as this.

Our four awardees have redefined the meaning of excellence. The accolade is conferred upon them because they have made our national consciousness more visible and to be felt worldwide.

Allow me to linger, even for just a little bit, as we remember these outstanding Filipinas.

Gloria Romero graced our screens for generations. Her career spanned an entire era, yet her presence not once ever felt dated. She was awarded seven FAMAS Awards, three Gawad Urian Awards, four Luna Awards, and many others.

Naalala ninyo ba noong bata-bata pa tayo? 'Pag sapit ng hapon, mapapanood natin sa telebisyon ang mga pelikulang pinagbibidahan ni Ms. Gloria Romero. Tumatak ang alaala ng kanyang pagganap sa "Dalagang Ilocana." Pinatawa niya tayo bilang Tita Minerva sa "Palibhasa Lalake," at pinaiyak tayo sa "Tanging Yaman."

She grew with the film and the television industry, or perhaps, and I think this is even more accurate, the industry grew around the one and only Gloria Romero.

As I first came in this evening and the video came out – I am so privileged to say that I have known and known well all of these wonderful women.

And as I was walking in and the video of Gloria Romero was being played, I immediately reacted, "Mommy!" Why? Iginuhit ng Tadhana. *[applause]* She was my mommy. She played Imelda Marcos. I played myself.

I remember it very well. I was seven years old. And every – after school... The first day dinala na lang ako sa set. Hindi ko alam, hindi na masyadong naipaliwanag sa akin. But there I was playing myself like an idiot not knowing what I was doing. *[laughter]*

And with these brilliant people all around me... Oh, by the way, I made P2,000 from that movie. *[laughter]* Binayaran ako. Mayroon akong Union card dahil professional ako.

But I had known her. And since then, every time I have seen her, it has always been like a reunion and she's one of what I would describe as Old World lady, lady all the way through, a true class act. And I am happy that I was able to meet her. I am happy that I was able to – not being an actor but managed to work with her and such a privilege. And so it is with great joy that we are able to do this. It is only sad that it is posthumous.

Now, Gaita reimagined Italian cuisine by giving it a Filipino heart. She started off as a chef and that she just wanted to cook and was bringing actually Italian food to the Philippines. But she managed to go far beyond that.

In the process, she gave us something so beautiful and something that we could call our own.

I remember we were traveling with my family in 2016 and we walked into a very important three-Michelin-star restaurant in San Sebastian in Spain. And we sat down to eat. And the chef came rushing out of the kitchen and said to us, “Did you hear? Did you hear? Did you hear?”

And Liza and I were saying, “What are they talking about?” “Your chef Margarita Forés is now the Best Asia’s Female Chef in 2016.” [applause]

She was posthumously honored with the 2025 Woodford Reserve Icon Award. Gaita left a legacy that will be remembered in the meals that she created.

Because when she would make a meal for you, of course, the food was excellent, the food was brilliant, but it was an experience. It was something that you remember. And say, “You know I had dinner in this place and the food was prepared by Gaita Forés.” And it made a change, it kicked up the experience to something that is far from ordinary.

And she did this without... I think I have a suspicion – Amado, tell me if I’m wrong – but she didn’t think she was doing this. She just wanted to cook. She just wanted to make the food better. She just wanted to make pasikat “Oh, try this, try this, try this.”

And it wasn’t something that “I want to be famous.” “I want to, you know, have all these awards and all of this.” But just because she just loved – she appreciated, of course, Italian cooking but she loved Filipino cooking enough to say “we’re just as good as this.”

And she put it together. And because of her travels, because of her interactions with other renowned chefs, she succeeded. And to show that Filipino food is just as good as yours and we can actually fuse them together. And that I think is her achievement.

Pilita Corrales, the one and only Asia’s Queen of Song. Her voice cradled people across continents, but she always came home to her native Cebuano and Tagalog— to the music that raised us.

Sino ba naman ang makakalimot sa kanyang angking ganda, galing sa pagkanta, at kabutihang loob?

Hindi lamang siya isang reyna ng sining, nagsilbi rin bilang haligi ng industriya ng musika. Pinakilala at binigyang kinang niya ang musikang Pilipino sa pandaigdigang entablado.

She won Best Performer [at] the Tokyo Music Festival. She was honored with a FAMAS and Lifetime Achievement Awards. And whenever she sang, we would be moved and would feel at home.

Well, again, I am privileged to be able to say that I knew her. Because in many, many cases kapagka umiikot kami kasama ng father ko, ng mother ko, pagka mayroong mga malalaking event, may rally, may program na ganyan, madalas sumasama siya. And she would always be there.

And if you look at all her awards and how many – the millions that followed her and how she was held in such high esteem, she really was a simple Cebuana girl.

And I have – I have a funny... Again, another funny story to tell. We were in Agoo in La Union, and there was suddenly we were – sa bahay kami. Wala namang stage, wala namang ano pero suddenly instant program, nagkaroon ng instant program. Sabi nila somebody said to ano, “Ma’am Pilita, kumanta kayo, kumanta kayo.” Eh hindi siya nakabihis.

So, sabi niya, “O sige magbibihis lang ako.” Pagpunta namin sabi niya, doon siya, “Saan ka magbibihis?” “Doon.” Eh sabi ko, “Huwag ka diyan makikita ka sa labas.” Sabi niya sa akin, “Wala silang makikita na hindi pa nila nakita noon. So never mind.” *[laughter]*

Sabi ko ibang klase ‘to Queen of Song ito pero wala siyang pakialam. *[applause]* Talagang cowboy. And I think that’s a characteristic that runs through all our awardees tonight. Yes, they appreciated all of the prizes and the honors that were given them. But whatever it is that they did, they didn’t do it for that.

Look at Nora Aunor, how do we even speak of Ate Guy without feeling an ache in our chest?

Sinalamin niya ang bawat isa sa atin. Dahil sa angking galing at kabutihan sa kapwa, minahal siya – nakalagay dito “ng maraming Pilipino” – papalitan ko ‘yan – minahal siya ng lahat ng Pilipino. Bawat pelikula, bawat kanta, bawat palabas sa telebisyon, inaabangan, pumipila para manood ng sine, dinumog lahat ng mga Noranian. Ang kinang ng isang Superstar ay hindi kailanman kukupas.

Her list of accolades is extensive: international awards from Europe to Africa, maraming FAMAS, Gawad Urian, Metro Manila Film Festival, Luna, Star Awards.

FAMAS Hall of Fame siya. Named as National Artist for Film and Broadcast Arts, and rightfully so.

Whether in *Himala* – which was incidentally filmed doon sa harap, actually sa harap ng bahay namin sa Ilocos Norte, ‘yung sand dunes doon that’s where it was filmed – or sa *Tatlong Taong Walang Diyos*, Ate Guy looked into our eyes and pierced our souls and said: “*Ito ay kung sino tayo bilang mga Pilipino.*”

And again, having been able to know... Well, you know there was a time where I had to choose whether to be a Vilmanian or a Noranian. *[laughter]* Hindi pa ginagamit ‘yung salitang balimbing, balimbing na ako. Palipat-lipat ako pagka kung sino...

I have another – a story about Nora Aunor. The first birthday I spent as the son of the President, 1965, my 8th birthday was my first birthday spent here downstairs. It was my birthday party. This girl came and sang for us. And, of course, you’re a seven-year-old kid. You really don’t -- you’re not thinking about it. So, this girl sang for us and it was great. She was wonderful.

But later on, we start seeing her on TV. And sabi ko, “Hindi ba ‘yan ‘yung kumanta doon sa party ko?” “Oo, ‘yan si Nora Aunor!” And that’s the first time I met her. But since then, of course, we ran into each other all the time.

We would see each other at dinners. We would see each other at events. And always I think that Pinoy immediately felt a connection with her. I don’t know what it is. It’s like one of those intangibles that special people have. That it’s really there are no words for it.

But every person that she performed in front of, every person that saw a film that she made, immediately felt a connection. This could be my cousin, this could be my sister, this could be my girlfriend, this could be my... That was... Iyon ang quality ni Nora. And iyon talagang ano ni Ate Guy.

At saka I was – during the wake, I was talking to Tirso and I said, “O ito, si Guy and Pip. ‘Di ba ito ‘yung Guy and Pip talaga from the time?”

And this is still how we remember her. Starting from a young girl with the charm of a Filipina. And that came across. But she had the talent, she had the particular skill to communicate that in her song and in her films. And that’s why, once again, we honor her today.

These women -- they illuminated our consciousness. They taught us who we are and who we could become.

So, to the families of the awardees: Thank you for sharing them with us. What they contributed to the country cannot even, even be realized, and certainly cannot be paid back. But we will remember and we will pass it on.

Sa ating mga kababayan, nawa’y ipaalala sa atin ng gabing ito na ang sining at kultura ay hindi lamang bahagi ng ating mga nakaraan. Hinuhubog din [nito] ang ating pagkakakilanlan at nagbibigay inspirasyon sa atin patungo sa mas maunlad na kinabukasan.

To Gloria, to Margarita, to Pilita, to Nora—it seems very little but the best we can do – *maraming, maraming, maraming salamat po. [applause]*

You live on in every artist who takes the risk, in every child who has fond dreams, in every citizen who wishes to let the world know what it means to be a Filipino.

Maraming salamat po.

Mabuhay ang kulturang Pilipino. [applause]

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