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Pie in the face of Larry Henares

Many people who like to be in step with the times but never watch Larry Henares's late-night TV show ("Make my day," on the sequestered Channel 9) are very sorry they've fallen into the habit of switching channels whenever he's on. They're sorry because they missed the sensational May 10 episode that, to this day, remains a sizzling tidbit breakfast-club habitues in Makati, Quezon City, San Juan, Mandaluyong and Makati love to chew on.

Like many others, I missed taking in that one. Like many others, I've never given a hoot to whatever Larry Henares has to say -- in print as a columnist, or on the boob tube as talk-show host. But the May 10 episode, so I was told after it had shocked all of Henares's 286 viewers throughout Metro Manila (that includes the Henares household domestics), was something else. Tapes of that particular show, which was described as "totally unbelievable," are being sold on the sly as a collector's item. Probably an exaggeration, but I wouldn't put it past the enterprising camera men of Channel 9.

I tried to get a tape (and even offered to pay, if necessary) but failed. And so I did the next best thing. I interviewed two of the three prominent guests of the show -- Sergio Osmeña III and Franklin Drilon. The third guest was Juan Flavier, the little roly-poly health secretary, but I couldn't find him.

Based on the account of both Serge and Frank, here is what happened, more or less: All three were invited because they had two things in common. First, they were all sure winners, based on the early Namfrel count; and second, they were all first-timers, or neophyte senators-elect. They assumed that they were to be interviewed on what they intended to do now that their victory at the polls was a certainty. On Larry's panel were Sen. Heherson Alvarez and Standard columnist Nelson Navarro, two sober gentlemen you'd never suspect would be capable of pulling any crazy stunts.

The show was breezing through at an admirable clip when abruptly, Henares announced that the three "neophytes" were to undergo some sort of "initiation" right there on the set. The three guests were made to stand up shoulder-to-shoulder facing the camera. From backstage there emerged three faggots (obviously from Henares's staff) who sneaked up behind the guests and blindfolded them. The three faggots then proceeded to make them look like the Roman senators of old, covering them with white bedsheets that served as "robes"; for the finishing touch, the faggots made them wear "crowns" of what were supposed to be laurel twigs.

And then, the panelists, led by Henares, positioned themselves right in front of the blindfolded guests for the climax of this exciting live television program. From backstage, the faggots brought out about a half-dozen pies and lined them up on the panelists' table. Then it began. In a moment, the whole set exploded in guffaws and snickering.

Serge Osmeña, the only "survivor" of the snafu, said he became suspicious even before the show had started. The three faggots, he said, had hung around for no apparent reason in his dressing

room. When the snickering began, he decided to peer from under his blindfold and saw several pies on the table and Nelson Navarro right in front of him holding one. He warned Nelson not to even think about it, and forthwith slapped the pie from Nelson's hand. But damage had been done. Beside him, he saw Flavier's face all messed up with cream pie, totally "flaviergasted" (an expression coined by my friend, Lakas-Laban spokesman Chito Villanueva while listening to Osmeña 's account of the incident).

Likewise, Franklin Drilon's face was all gooey, his eyes showing a deeply-wounded, unbelieving expression, but the former justice secretary kept his cool.

But not Serge. After slapping down Nelson's pie, he picked it up and ran after Henares around the set, on live TV. The first pie he threw at Henares missed. Serge got another one from the table and, holding Henares firmly, squished the pie on his face with such passion that Henares's toupee nearly came off. When he was through, he confronted Senator Alvarez and chided the latter for allowing the whole thing to happen. Having said that, he walked off the set in a huff. Meanwhile, Drilon and Flavier, still stunned, went back to their seats. It took another minute or two before the two decided to walk out, too.

Looking back, Serge said he had always known Henares to be a prankster. But never did he imagine that Henares would be so bold as to try to victimize him. "But I hold no grudges. After all, it was I who put the pie in his face."

Frank is less conciliatory. "He humiliated me. Everytime I recall the incident, I can't help but feel the anger well up in me. He has publicly apologized but still, I can't forget it."

The day after this controversial incident, the office of Jose Mari Gonzalez, chief executive officer of Channel 9, was swamped with irate calls from both televiewers and followers of all the three senators-elect. Henares, meanwhile, tried to make amends by writing a note to the three lawmakers. He had only one note to all three, copy furnished to Senator Alvarez, Navarro, and Gonzalez. But he personalized the note to each address ee with the salutation (in bold black Pentel pen strokes): "To Frank -- whom I went out of my way to help --". Henares's letter of apology:

"That pie throwing business was out of line, and totally inexcusable, and unforgiveable. I apologize profusely. Big mistake. I should have asked first, as indeed it was planned at first, but my staff and I were just carried away. And if there was any objection, I would not have done it. I was going to ask you guys to throw the pies at me after the extro.

"Again I apologize. Especially to you whom I consider my dear friends." (Signed) Larry.

But Senator Drilon was not content with that. He wrote back: "Dear Mr. Henares: I was humiliated in public. It is only fair that your apologies, and that of RPN management, are likewise made public (on the 10 p.m. news and your program). I'll be waiting. Thank you." (Signed) F. M. Drilon.

Larry Henares did publicly apologize in compliance with Drilon's demand -- on both the 10 p.m. news and his program. But he also astutely pointed out that it takes a real man to apologize for a wrong.

Come to think of it, the whole rigmarole only demonstrated once again the very well known fact that originality is not Larry Henares's strong suit. Pie throwing was a gag that went over big in the pre-World War I era of the silents. The names Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and the Three Stooges evoke memories of a long-gone era of tasteless, crass, gross slapstick comedy which Henares has tried to revive and foist on a 21st-century television audience at the expense of some of the nation's most respected leaders.