

Nestor Redondo and the Pendulum Classics

by Vincent Fago

Back in 1970, I was living in Vermont, doing freelance work for comic book producers in New York. Someone from Pendulum Press of Connecticut came to talk about the possibility of my accepting a long-term contract, and thus was started the *Pendulum Now Age Classics Series*. One of the first books in the series, *The Great Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, was illustrated by Nestor Redondo. He went on to draw twenty more of the Pendulum books.

The Pendulum project consisted of over a hundred classics adaptations and continued for ten years. The books were conceived along the lines of the old *Classics Illustrated* comics, but with major differences. The script was set in type, instead of hand-lettered, for easier reading by children. Black and white illustrations were used because we believed that comic book colors confused the simplicity of the illustrations. Story panels were larger, and printed on better quality paper, and the books themselves were about the size of a popular paperback. The publisher had Title One funds from the government to spend on projects to encourage children to read. We believed that this accessible format would give more children familiarity with some of the world's greatest stories.

The publisher knew of my tenure as editor-in-chief of Marvel Comics and wanted someone with my experience. My search for artists and writers started in New York. I tried the old pros I was familiar with, but because of the then-current comic book

boom there were only a few script writers available and very few artists. There was little interest in a ten-year commitment.

Then I got lucky—my eye fell on a one-page comic strip with shadows that spoke even louder than the wonderful drawings, and with perspectives only a talented pro would dare to undertake. It was a scene out of Dickens—with a dynamism that was breathtaking—and the page was signed by Nestor Redondo.

I looked for Redondo in New York but discovered he lived in the Philippines. We spoke on the phone several times and he said he was interested in the project and also in helping find other artists who could handle the material. Over the next ten years I worked closely with a dozen Filipino artists.

Of Mandarin Chinese ancestry, Nestor Redondo was tall, dignified, and handsome. He was a remarkable man and an extraordinary artist. He was quiet and deeply religious, with a lively sense of humor. All of his illustrations were done with special Chinese brushes. A voracious reader, he had a deep appreciation for the stories he illustrated.

He was not unacquainted with tragedy. In the terrible period during the Japanese invasion his father left home one morning for work and was never seen again. It was assumed that he had been captured and killed by Japanese soldiers. Nestor was only a boy when this happened but it was an event of deep and enduring sadness. Perhaps because of this, his wife and their

four children were of exceptional importance to him.

The Pendulum production involved three trips to the Philippines and working with frequent tight deadlines that necessitated sending material back and forth from Vermont to the Philippines via a courier service. It was something of a miracle that nothing was ever lost on these 12,000-mile trips.

On the first trip in 1970, I worked out an arrangement with Nestor to coordinate the work in the Philippines. I also met the other artists. Filipino artists had been doing comic books for years, many for the Philippine market in their native language, Tagalog, and many in English for the U.S. market. These artists had an interesting visual background developed from reading western comics and from their years spent copying drawings of the old masters, a leftover from the many years of Spanish occupation of their land. Later, during the years in which the Philippines were a territory of the United States, English was made the official language.

My part of the ongoing project was to familiarize myself with the stories so I could keep an eye on the writers who laid them out in script form with scene descriptions and dialogue. My wife, D'Ann, and I worked to provide related research material and finally pull all parts of the project together. We made thousands of photocopies of the research materials necessary for the illustrators to tell the story, draw the costumes and illustrate the scenes.

The mysterious in life has always attracted me. As a child, I lived with my large family in an apartment in the Italian section of the Bronx, only a half city block away from the zoo. On hot summer nights when the air was still and the windows open I could hear the lions roar. To me these were sounds that opened wide the doors of

fantasy. They suggested other worlds and places far from the Bronx. I sensed in Nestor a comparable attraction to mystery; to things and places beyond the ordinary. In the Philippines he took us to places that were mysterious and strange to us, a canoe trip on a fast-moving river into a jungle where scenes from *Apocalypse Now* had been filmed, with ruins left along the banks in the dense growth. He accompanied us to a large old Chinese cemetery built on the premise that people interred there would soon be returning. Mailboxes in front of the crypts waited for use when their owners returned and there were picnic tables and refrigerators filled with food at each plot so that relatives could come and spend time there. He took us to Zomboanga, on the southwestern tip of the island of Mindanao, where we visited water people who spent most of their lives on board their little fishing boats with huge multicolored sails, whose women did marvelous rug weaving with dyed palm fronds and whose children had scarcely ever set foot on earth.

The entire experience was wonderful, not only for me but also for my family. It became a family project and much of the work was shared between the four of us. My wife and my daughter, Celie, accompanied me on all three trips. Our son John, who wrote many of the Pendulum adaptations, was photographing in Asia and met us in Manila on the last trip.

Working with Nestor as an artist and as a friend, getting to know his family, other Filipino artists and their families, along with the general fascination of spending this much time in a culture so fundamentally different from our own increased our understanding of possibilities, places and people. In some curious way it was as if Arthur Conan Doyle, with his own mystery-minded talent, had a hand in setting up this experience for all of us.