

Unsilenced

A 10-Minute Play about
Journalism, Friendship, and the Truth

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Cast of Characters

Lorena Brillantes - 18, Filipina American. Journalist for the Luther Burbank Titan.

Colonel Yay Panlilio - 32. Filipina American. Journalist, Spy, Guerrilla Fighter in the Philippines during World War 2. She was born in Colorado to a white father and a pinay mother. She went to the Philippines to study journalism before she got caught up in the war and became a double agent when she worked at a Radio Station spreading propaganda over the airwaves--where she secretly gave plans to the rebels.

Maria Ressa - 53. Filipina and American. Born in Manila but was raised in New Jersey. She is the co-founder of Rappler, a digital news organization. She was arrested by the Duterte government and falsely found guilty of cyberlibel. She and 5 other Rappler reporters were acquitted of all charges and she won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021.

Setting

Present day in Lorena's bedroom.

Lights up on LORENA sitting at her desk and focusing on what she's typed on her laptop's screen. Some hype energy music is playing.

Beside her laptop are two picture frames with the backs facing the audience so they can't see who's on them.

As the music starts to fade...

LORENA

Urgh! That still doesn't sound right...

(clearing her throat)

"I wasn't aware that I broke the nation's biggest story in American High School history, but I'm glad you asked that question, Ms. Machua."

We hear the "ringtone" of a FaceTime call coming in. It's Mr. Anderson, her school newspaper's Advisor. LORENA puts in her earbuds.

LORENA

Hey, Mr. Anderson. I was just practicing some of my answers to the press when my story comes out tomorrow.

How does, "I'm glad that you asked that question Ms. Machua." Or, do you think she'd be cool if I called her, "Manang Tina?"

(Pause)

I'm sorry, what?

(Pause)

What do you mean Mrs. Gambino's not going to run my story? She can't do that.

(Pause)

When do I have to let you know?

(Pause)

IN 10 MINUTES?!

(Pause)

Fine... FINE! Call me back after you talk to the lawyer.

Thanks.

Silence.

A tone from her laptop indicating that Mr. Anderson has left the conversation.

LORENA falls on the bed, grabs a pillow and screams into it.

LORENA puts down the pillow and goes to her desk with the laptop where there are two picture frames on it. She picks one of them up.

LORENA

Colonel Yay. Can you believe they killed my story?

LORENA picks up the other picture frame.

LORENA

And you, Maria, what would you do if President Duterte tried to kill your story? Actually, he probably did try.

LORENA holds them both up next to each other.

LORENA

But seriously, what would you do if both of your stories were silenced?

LORENA holds both picture frames up waiting for an answer...

LORENA

I'm waiting....?

LORENA slowly sits up and puts both of the picture frames back on the desk.

LORENA

It'd be so much easier if you could tell me what to do...

LORENA looks at her laptop and moves towards it and sits at her desk to start typing.

LORENA

This is for research... this is for research...

(She starts typing)

How would Colonel Yay Panlilio react if her editor told her that her story wasn't good enough to print?

Enter the actor playing COLONEL YAY Panlilio, dressed in World War 2 fatigues and smoking a cigarette. She mimes the actions as Lorena says what she would have said.

LORENA

(pause and reads her screen)

“In between puffs of her cigarette, she would ask her editor what was wrong and like the bullets in her gun, she would shoot down every argument.”

Now that’s a pinay reporter!

(begins typing)

Now how would Maria Ressa from Rappler react if she wrote a story that a news director wouldn’t run?

Enter the actor playing MARIA RESSA in her business suit, short hair and glasses and pantomimes the words that Lorena speaks as she reads...

LORENA

(reading)

“You have to stand firm and pull back your shoulders and confidently say, ‘I’ve stated every fact, interviewed every source, and traced each source’s intentions for their answers. There’s no story to kill when all the truths are alive.’”

I wish I could write like that.

MARIA

You can and that’s what you’ve done.

COLONEL YAY

She’s not bad.

LORENA

Uh... how are you talking to me?

COLONEL YAY

If you didn’t want to hear from us, then why’d you ask?

MARIA

Colonel Yay. Pacencia ka na.

COLONEL YAY

If I was patient, then I wouldn’t have survived the war. She needs to grab the carabao by the horns and steer her story in the right direction.

LORENA

But what is the right direction when the story I've been working on for the whole semester won't even see the light of day.

MARIA

Then you have to find the right instrument to start breaking the walls to let the light in.

COLONEL YAY

I like that. Break things. So, what's your story?

LORENA

Some kids at my high school are getting into colleges because their parents are bribing university admissions officers.

MARIA

Those are serious accusations.

COLONEL YAY

The more serious the better the story. Before we get into the juice, what was the kernel for the story that made it go pop?

LORENA

I heard my dad on the phone with his comadre asking her how did she get her daughter into Princeton, because I didn't get in.

COLONEL YAY

(to Maria)

Isn't that where you went?

MARIA

It's an expensive school.

LORENA

It's also hard to get into.

COLONEL YAY

It is if you don't have the money to bribe your way in.

(To Maria)

I'm not saying that's what you did.

MARIA

(To Yay)

Thank you, I think.

(To Lorena)

But is this why you think the bribery took place?

LORENA

All I heard from my dad was, “That was more money than he could ever afford.”

COLONEL YAY

Well, she just said it’s an expensive school.

LORENA

But then I heard him ask, “How can she, the school’s principal, afford that much money to get Ning into Princeton?”

MARIA

Ning?

LORENA

Short for my best friend’s real name, Luningning-

COLONEL YAY

So, let me get this straight: Your dad’s friend is your school’s principal-

LORENA

Mrs. Gambino-

MARIA

Who is bribing an Admissions Counselor to get your best friend-

COLONEL YAY

Luningning-

MARIA

Into Princeton.

LORENA

And both of our parents have done so much for the community. They’ve raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for a Community Center. So if this story came out-

MARIA

It’d blow everything up, Mrs. Gambino’s career, your friendship with-

COLONEL YAY

Luningning.

MARIA

And maybe your dream of being a journalist.

LORENA

But only if I agree to sue the school and the district from preventing us from running my story. My advisor is calling me back in...

(checks a clock)

Four minutes asking if that's what I want to do. But if I do that, I'm never going to get my story out because then it'll be part of a lawsuit and entered into evidence.

MARIA

And that's why you prompted us, di ba?

LORENA

Yes. What should I do? Sue or stay quiet?

COLONEL YAY

So, before we can answer your prompt, we need to know if you have hard evidence-

MARIA

Facts-

COLONEL YAY

Records-

MARIA

Photographs-

LORENA

How about a video recording of Luningning's mom meeting with Princeton's admissions officer exchanging a large manila envelope?

COLONEL YAY

That could've been anything. Like a recipe for Adobo or Strawberry Bibingka.

LORENA

The video shows the admissions officer pulling out stacks of hundreds before sliding them back into the envelope and putting it in his satchel.

MARIA

Did you take the video yourself?

LORENA

No. A security camera did. My friend saw the exchange happen in a parking lot outside of her parent's boba shop.

COLONEL YAY

Very interesting. What's boba?

LORENA

Knowing that they just installed the camera outside their shop, I asked if I could see the footage.

MARIA

And I'm presuming that you verified the person on the video as the University Admissions Officer?

LORENA

Mr. Eugene Dersham. Spent the last 14 years as the Admissions Counselor at Princeton University who happens to own homes in New Jersey, Maui, and in the Maldives.

COLONEL YAY

I didn't know University Admissions Officer's could afford three homes around the world.

MARIA

They can't.

COLONEL YAY

And I'm assuming that Luningning's mom knows about the video?

LORENA

She does now since she's the one who killed my story.

MARIA

She might have killed the story, but she can't kill the truth.

COLONEL YAY

Yeah. You could go big time now! I bet your story will prick up a lot of ears once they hear it on the radio!

LORENA

Uh... radio's not a big thing nowadays.

MARIA

She's right. You should start blogging about it. That's how a lot of stories get shared, liked, and commented. News written for the masses will never go out of fashion.

LORENA

I don't know. Once a person starts to make something go viral it never works, because going viral is the opposite of having to work for it... it just happens.

MARIA

But you know what's fair and just. How will the rest of the students and their parents feel about this unfair advantage? Their anger will fuel your virality.

LORENA

I know. But I also have to think about the scandal that will involve our parents, maybe breaking the community that both of them worked so hard to put together, and worst of all... betraying Ning.

COLONEL YAY

Does any of that matter when you have a story that's going to affect so many people? When I worked in the news department at the radio station in the Philippines during the war, I passed along secret messages, on the air, to our troops where an ambush was supposed to happen. Do you think I worried about me... or the lives of the people who would eventually free the Philippines?

MARIA

When I went to Mark Zuckerberg to tell him that 95% of Filipinos on Facebook could be used to emotionally changing how a person's vote can be changed by using fake information, instead of saying how the platform can be used to mitigate the false facts, he asked me where are the other 5%? I'm talking about the harm social media can do to real lives, and he's only worried about why the other 5% weren't on Facebook!

LORENA takes in what was said in a pause.

LORENA

Ms. Ressa, with all due respect, the percentage you used in your book, *How to Stand Up to a Dictator*, was that 97% of Filipinos were using Facebook.

MARIA

It was? Excuse me... calculating... calculating... calculating...

LORENA

You're right though, maybe if the channels aren't being responsible for providing the news... maybe the ones who hears the news should come from the ones directly reporting them--the human reporters--like the ones the both of you are modeled on.

COLONEL YAY

You're hatchin' a plan.

MARIA

A course of action to make an impact.

LORENA

You could say that.

MARIA

What about your dad?

COLONEL YAY

And your Community?

MARIA

And what about Luningning? Do you think she knows what her mom did?

LORENA

I don't know.

COLONEL YAY

You didn't tell her?

LORENA

I... I don't know how. I mean... She doesn't get annoyed when I ask 'why?'. She actually gets a kick when I keep pressing for the truth. She knows how I get when I sink my teeth into a story. Ning's the only person who gets me. But I don't know how she'd feel about this.

COLONEL YAY

If she gets you, then she'd understand how you feel about justice and creating equal opportunities.

She'd understand your truth? Your facts.

LORENA

And you've both shown me how important all of these are and why we do what we do... and did.

MARIA

So, what are you going to do if your school newspaper won't shed light on the story you broke?

COLONEL YAY

As long as you break something, I'll be proud of ya.

LORENA

Well, if the school paper's a broken way of sharing this story, it's time to build something on our own.

A FaceTime ringtone is heard.

LORENA

I have to take this.
Thank you for everything.

COLONEL YAY and MARIA exit.

LORENA

Hey, Mr. Anderson.
I'm letting you know that even though the school won't run the story I wrote, I can't let
going to court, or Mrs. Gambino... or my dad, dictate how I share it.
Thanks for teaching me how to write the news, but now I need to tell it... my way.

LORENA hangs up the call and reaches for her
phone.

LORENA

(while looking at her phone)

I'm sorry, Ning, I hope you understand.

LORENA does a couple of swipes and presses a
button.

LORENA

Hi.. is this Tina Machua from Good Day Sacramento?

(Pause)

My name is Lorena Brillantes and you worked with my dad for fundraiser for the Filipino
Community Center in South Sac...

(Pause)

Yeah, he's doing fine, thanks, but is it okay if I talk to you about a news story I wrote for
my high school paper at Luther Burbank? I think it's important that people know the
truth...

Blackout.

END OF PLAY