

Cebu's 'trial of century'

Written by RYAN SONGALIA
Friday, 29 April 2011 19:41



A scene from "Give Up Tomorrow."



Special to the Filipino Reporter

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It's not often that you walk into a movie, and leave adopting a cause.

"Give Up Tomorrow," which examines Cebu's "Trial of the Century" and the deplorable lack of justice afforded to Paco Larrañaga and his six co-defendants who were on trial for the rape and murder of the Chiong sisters in 1997, does just that.

The documentary thriller opened to rave reviews at the tenth annual Tribeca Film Festival in New York City.

By the end of Monday's screening at Chelsea Clearview Cinemas, not a single spectator remained seated.

Directed by Michael Collins and produced by Filipino native Marty Syjuco (who is related to Larrañaga through marriage) of Thoughtful Robot Productions, the film gives a voice to the voiceless defendants who were denied due process and their constitutional right to testify in their own trial.

The film displays the overwhelming evidence of Larrañaga's innocence in a clear and concise manner, while not avoiding the perspective of those who put him in jail.

"Paco wasn't allowed to testify, so I felt the film wouldn't be complete without him being heard," said Collins.

The filmmakers snuck small cameras into New Bilibid Prison near Manila to tape Larrañaga's interviews while he awaited execution.

"Give Up Tomorrow" is a tale of political corruption, international diplomacy, media manipulation, family solidarity and the lead defendant's resilient adherence to hope and principle which proves that reality is far more outrageous than fantasy.

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Larrañaga's family, including parents Manuel and Margot Larrañaga, older sister Mimi Larrañaga and several of Larrañaga's friends who had vouched for his alibi on the night of the disappearance were in attendance for the film's premiere and even addressed the audience.

"Paco hasn't seen the film but he's very excited about the release," said Mimi Larrañaga.

"Paco used four of his eight allowed phone calls [from a Spanish prison] to find out how the premiere had gone.

"He was very excited to hear that Robert De Niro had signed a hat for him."

The film took six years to produce, but the fight rages on.

The film's producers and family continue to petition for the release of Larrañaga and his co-defendants with the help of organizations like the Equal Justice Foundation, through their websites www.giveuptomorrow.com and www.justiceforpaco.org, as well as social media campaigns.

"We really shouldn't underestimate the power of spreading the word," said Syjuco, who sported a "Free Paco Now" button.

"Now that the truth is out, we'd like to get the public's help with bringing justice to these innocent men."

The Tribeca screening wraps up Friday night at Chelsea Clearview Cinemas, but opens at the Hot Docs Film Festival in Toronto on May 4 at the TIFF Bell Lightbox 3.

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(Editor's note: Ryan Songalia is a member of the Boxing Writers Association of America [BWAA] and contributes to GMA News and the Filipino Reporter newspaper. He can be reached at ryan@ryansongalia.com. An archive of his work can be found at www.ryansongalia.com. Follow him on Twitter at www.twitter.com/ryansongalia).



Consul Elena Maningat (l.) with director Michael Collins (c.) and producer Marty Syjuco at the after-party for the world premier of "Give Up Tomorrow."