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'Legend of Tessie Agana' chronicles journey from child stardom in the Philippines to retirement in Cave Creek

BY DREW RUSSELL

Once considered the Shirley Temple of the Philippines and starring in films alongside her mother Consuelo Agana (stage name Lina Estrella), Tessie Agana now lives a quiet life in Cave Creek, Arizona.

The two were an iconic mother/daughter duo in the 1950s, starring in 40 films collectively and winning the hearts of millions of fans worldwide.

Agana's daughter Mylene Richardson chronicled the life stories of this mother-daughter duo in her recently released book "The Legend of Tessie Agana: Beloved Child Star of the Philippines: An Intimate Portrait of My Mother."

The book chronicles the life stories of two separate yet inextricably connected film careers and the personal choices behind them. As the author learns more about her famous mother, she experiences her own voyage of self-discovery which provides insight into her life.

Mylene connects with her mom who today lives in Cave Creek with dementia. Mylene listens to her mother's stories of yesteryear, and their candid discussions, described in the book, break barriers between mother and daughter.

"The process of writing this book was an eye-opener in every way, and my mother and I have rebuilt a more fulfilling relationship," Mylene said. "We have learned to embrace the past and celebrate the present. This story, I believe, can only be told from the lens of a family member revealing details out of love, respect and honor."

In 2022, Tessie received the Lifetime Achievement Award at the Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences (FAMAS) during its 70th Awards ceremony. Tessie and her children and grandchildren were able to travel to the Philippines for the event.

Looking Back

Tessie Agana was affectionately deemed "The Nation's Little Sweetheart" and known as the "Shirley Temple of the Philippines." With unsparing truth, Mylene offers the first intimate portrait of her mother, whose early fame and exposure to the public eye led to dark shadows that impacted her entire life.

The story follows their early lives and extraordinary rise to fame. At just eight years old, Tessie starred in the lead role as a young child actor in a movie, and, overnight, she catapulted to a household name and broke box-office records with a sensational hit called "Roberta." Although a shy young girl, Tessie's sweetness and charisma captivated the entire country.

Full of behind-the-scenes anecdotes, the book transitions to personal narratives of Tessie's adult struggles — the complexities of family dynamics, depression and isolation, showing how in Tessie's life, a spiral of love,



Linda Estrella and Tessie Agana, Philippines' iconic mother/daughter film star duo of the 1950s. Submitted photos



Mylene Richardson, author of "The Legend of Tessie Agana: Beloved Child Star of the Philippines" with her mother, Tessie Agana, legendary movie star from the Philippines.

mental health and pain lurked behind a charmed façade.

Mylene also tells of historical events that played important roles as the background to the story. During World War II, Mylene's grandparents hid in the rice fields from the Japanese soldiers on their dangerous walks to Sunday Mass. Consuelo gave birth to Tessie in 1942 with bombs exploding around the hospital.

Tessie's mother, who went by Linda Estrella on stage, began acting at 17 years old. Her beauty, with hazel eyes and an operatic voice, had fans adoring her. The mother/daughter duo starred in popular movies together and toured the world as professional singers.

Fame has always come with difficulties. Hundreds of fans gathered, day and night, outside the gates to their home. They had to have around-the-clock bodyguards. Thousands lined the streets to catch a glimpse as they were en route to an event led by a police motorcade. With paparazzi surrounding them, they lived in a glass bubble where every move was written about or was the latest gossip. This close, almost

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unbearable, scrutiny led to the decision to move to the United States.

Tessie felt an immediate change from the whirlwind of the Philippines, and after the move, she was living like every teenager. For the first time, she experienced a sense of relief and freedom without chaperones or bodyguards. Growing up as a teenager in America was fascinating for Tessie. She had high school girlfriends, listened to records, drove to the beach and had crushes on stars like Elvis and Rock Hudson.

"It's rare for a daughter to put into poignant prose the travails and triumphs of her mother," said Gina Vera-Perez De Venecia, humanitarian, former congresswoman in the Philippines. "It is rarer still for a mother to view her entire life through the prism of her beloved offspring. Yet, this is the lyrical brilliance of this jewel of a book, 'The Legend of Tessie Agana.'"

The Author

Mylene Agana Jao Richardson is a first-time author who in 2009 developed a passionate desire to write a book as a way for her sons to learn about their grandmother and great-grandmother. This effort turned into years of interviews with family members and friends, and provided a unique glimpse into the lives of these important women.

Mylene was born in Manila, Philippines, and is the sixth of nine children (six boys and three girls) of Tessie Agana Jao and Dr. Rodolfo Jao. Although Mylene grew up in



Book cover of "The Legend of Tessie Agana: Beloved Child Star of the Philippines."

Valparaiso, Indiana, her trips back to the Philippines are her most memorable family vacations.

Today, Mylene lives in Scottsdale, Arizona with her husband and their two teenage sons.

For more information about Mylene and "The Legend of Tessie Agana: Beloved Child Star of the Philippines: An Intimate Portrait of My Mother," visit mylenerichardson.com.

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