

West End star ready for the West Side

by DOT RAMOS BALASBAS-GANCAYCO
Philstar.com

BY simply looking at her, one would never be able to dream up the mountain of credentials and achievements Joanna Ampil holds to her name. Entering Tropezz Restaurant Bar for the one-on-one interview in sweatpants, sneakers, and her hair up in a bun, one would have never guessed that she was actually one of our country's greatest and proudest contributions to London's West End. Though simple as she was without a trace of makeup and her diminutive 5'2" frame, there was no mistaking her natural beauty and refreshing, easygoing presence. She had just come straight from a rehearsal for Audie Gemora's production of *West Side Story*, directed by no less than Menchu Lauchengco-Yulo. Joanna will play the female lead, Maria, opposite Christian Bautista.

A high school graduate of St. Mary's College Quezon City, Joanna moved to London in 1992, at only 17, to play Kim in *Miss*

Saigon. Sometimes referred to as "West End's Lea Salonga," she has performed for audiences all over Europe, including even the Queen of England herself. Joanna has done shows all the way down to Australia, and will do a concert in Hong Kong after *West Side Story* in Manila. On being compared to Lea, Joanna gushes, "It's such an honor, and I'm really very flattered. Lea is something else."

Auditioning for *Miss Saigon* in 1992, Joanna admits hardly having any idea what she was getting into. "I didn't even know anything about the show," she says. "But that cluelessness, the innocence — maybe that's how they saw the Kim in me." She also admits to even having had to "white lie" about her age, since they wanted someone who was at least 18 years old. Seems like all that paid off, however, and Joanna was asked to play no less than the lead character, Kim. With hardly any singing experience outside school productions and contests,

and no acting background at all, she left for London in November 1992 with her mother, as she was still a minor after all. Opening night was in February 1993, and thus began her exciting career.

After taking part in *Miss Saigon's* symphonic recording, the self-confessed workaholic did the show in Australia for 15 months, and then was involved in an avalanche of other projects and productions. She played the challenging part of Mary Magdalene in Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ, Superstar!*; a series of musical concerts across Europe; the role of Eponine in *Les Miserables*; a short stint in the Philippines in a production titled, *East Meets West*; the role of Fantine in, again, *Les Miserables*; *Hair*, a rock production in London; a fringe musical by Hammerstein and Lloyd Webber titled, *Musical of Musicals*; the part of Mimi in *Rent's* European tour; and finally, the role of a Jewish girl in a production titled, *I Sing*.



Joanna Ampil

Whew! Ever so practical, Joanna also completed a degree in public relations from the London College of International Business Studies, while playing the part of Eponine. "I'm so glad I did it," she says. When asked how she was able to get so much work, Joanna said that

it was all in one's attitude towards work and towards others. "You try not to get a reputation," she says. "So that they know you're professional and easy to work with." (I hear that she is much admired and a favorite, obviously, of no less than West End institutions, Cameron McKintosh and Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber.)

The *West Side Story* cast is studded with some of the country's and the world's most talented stars. Maria will be played alternately by Joanna Ampil and Karylle, daughter of Zsa Zsa Padilla, while the male lead of Tony will be essayed by Christian Bautista. Gian Magdangal will play Riff opposite Pam G. and Australia's Rowena Vilar for the role of Anita. While Karylle auditioned in person, Joanna sent in an audition tape all the way from London. She learned of the production from a small poster on a friend's blog. (Thank God for blogs, whatever they may be!) The rest is history.

When asked about director Menchu Lauchengco-Yulo, who also played the part of Maria back in the '80s, Joanna was all praises. "Even if this is her first major di-

recting stint, she's amazing," says the 33-year-old actress. "I haven't seen her perform, but I don't have to, to know she's brilliant." Joanna also shares that the cast is very close, and they all get along very well. She admits that *West Side Story* producer Audie Gemora inspired her to get into musical theater after seeing him in *Joseph, the Dreamer* when she was 17.

Joanna is more than thrilled to be playing Maria, which she admits is her dream role. She tells us that she has always wanted to do classical, and *West Side Story* is just the perfect outlet. Also, she finds that Maria is a very challenging role, especially because of the huge age gap between the character and herself (Maria is 16 in the story). "At the end of the day, it's just all really fulfilling." The seasoned performer claims that she still gets both nervous and excited every time she goes on stage. "You have to make your nerves benefit you instead of work against you," she tells us.

STAGES' production of West Side Story will be running from September to October 2008 at the Meralco Theatre.

MiZee Pro Hair

**GREAT NEWS!!!
HAIR REBONDING SPECIAL**

\$89

- No more curly or kinky hair.
- Only Japanese products are used.
- Keeps hair straight for 6 months or longer.

Other services:

- Color
- Cut
- Perm
- Highlight
- Eyelash Extensions
- Permanent Eyebrow

BEFORE **AFTER** **AFTER**

CLOSE EVERY 3RD SUNDAY
Call (213) 487.5923 or (213) 210.3612
for appointment
2717 W. Olympic Blvd., # 105, Los Angeles, CA 90006

Dr. Maria Pilar Bernardo

GENERAL DENTISTRY

- Diagnostic Examination
- Preventive Services
- Cosmetic Dentistry
- Teeth Whitening
- Dentures & Partial
- Root Canal Treatment
- Gum Treatment

Maintains a sterile environment. Gentle with kids. With very courteous and friendly staff. Most major insurance and medical accepted. Financing options available.

BACK TO SCHOOL SPECIAL
FREE CONSULTATION FOR KIDS 16 YRS OLD & UNDER (EVERY FRIDAY ONLY)
Promo only for new patients with no insurance.

\$55.00 regular cleaning (includes exam & necessary x-rays) (regular price \$115.00)
\$10 for initial examination with up to 4 X-rays
\$295 1 hr teeth whitening (regular price \$495.00)

323.660.2011
4331 West Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90029
cross street Fountain (between Vermont & Hyperion)

DR. MARIA PILAR BERNARDO

EE ENTERTAINMENT, PALOMAR ENTERPRISE, liveline, RO ENTERTAINMENT

in cooperation with

PX MARGO, HALIVE & CO., APS ASSIST, BAMBOO BISTRO, Startray

THE REAL SECRETS OF MONEY

of the MEN 80s

Get into the groove!

Louie Heredia Randy Santiago Raymond Lauchengco Cino Padilla

PALA CASINO SPA RESORT 11154 HWY 76, PALA, CA 92059
SEPTEMBER 20 (SATURDAY) 6:30 pm at the PALOMAR STARLIGHT THEATER

TICKET PRICES: \$49, \$59, \$79
toll free number 1.888.283.6690
(714) 932-7532 • (626) 617-9311 • (951) 500-0653 • (619) 757-7433 • (858) 578-9855

Tropicana Hotel & Casino, Las Vegas NV
September 28, 2008, The Grand Ballroom, Tropicana Hotel & Casino
EMAIL: ee_entertainment@yahoo.com

ALSO BROUGHT TO YOU BY

M. TELECOM, LA 18, El Cortez, PEOPLES, ASIAN JOURNAL, BEST, Nita's Restaurant

ARAUULLO CLASS '72 ALUMNI FOUNDATION, Cherry's SAATCHI

Mashuway News, SEAFOOD CITY, filmation, THE ORIGINAL VIRGIE'S RESTAURANT, BASS

Gandi SKINCARE

"Gaganda ka kay Gandi"
- Dina Bonnevie

Our treatment program includes:

- Microdermabrasion
- Chemical Peel
- Advanced Glycolics
- Intensive Acne Care
- Vitamin/Oxygen Infusion
- Eyelash Extension
- Permanent Makeup
- Protein/Vitamin Complex
- Enzyme Treatment
- Dry Sauna
- Accupressure
- Full Body Massage
- Ultra-Sonic-C Infusion
- Non-Surgical Lift
- Face Lift
- Eyelids Lift
- Chin Lift

Our Skin Care Products

Special!!
Gandi's Signature Facial
Reg. \$150.00
NOW ONLY
\$75.00

GANDI VILLAREAL / Licensed Aesthetician

GLENDALE CLINIC: 1250 Glendale Avenue, Ste.A, Glendale, CA 91205, TEL: 818.638.8769

ORANGE COUNTY CLINIC: 520 Brookhurst Street, Ste.124, Anaheim, CA 92801, TEL: 714.758.9809

EMERGENCY ONLY: 714.206.3081, Email: gandiskincare@msn.com, www.gandiskincare.com

Goodbye to warts, acne, age spots and stretch marks!

- Professional results require aesthetic expertise combined with superior products.
- We use Therapeutic Skin Care Products as used by Dermatologist nationwide.
- Your best solution is personalized skin care treatment with...

We accept all major Credit Cards, Gift Check available