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Ima Castro back in Manila for 'Aida,' 'In The Heights'

By JOJO P. PANALIGAN
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MANILA, Philippines — Though based in London since playing Kim in "Miss Saigon" in 2001, singer Ima Castro is still very Filipino and she even refuses to put on a British accent when talking to kababayans.

"Nakakapagod kasi mag-accent ng ganun," she said in a recent interview, laughing. "Pero kung gusto mo akong maglagay ng British accent pag nag-English ako, why nowt."

Castro, who, before "Miss Saigon," popularized the songs "Shine" and "Naniligaw, Naliligaw," takes with a grain of salt what many here consider undesirable. She remarked about the sweltering weather, the traffic and the mosquitoes inside her house in Tiaong, Quezon, but just in passing---as if these are parcel of life even for someone who has traveled and lived in many of the most beautiful places in the world including Tokyo, Singapore and Dublin.

Then again, the singer is in good spirits because she is home for the first time in 10 years in order to play lead roles in two musicals produced by Atlantis Productions. These are the title role in Elton John/Tim Rice pop rock musical "Aida," and Vanessa in the smash hit Tony Award winning musical, "In The Heights."

"I've been learning the songs even before I came here. Especially 'Written In The Stars' from 'Aida.' I think that song is one the best Broadway songs ever written," she said.

According to the release, Aida is a Nubian princess who fell in love with a captain in the Egyptian army after her capture and enslavement by the Egyptian empire. As forbidden loves blossom between them, the young lovers are forced to face death or part forever. "Aida" will run at the Carlos P. Romulo Auditorium, RCBC Plaza, Makati from June 24 to July 10, 2011.

Aside from studying her character in the musical, Castro plans to take lessons in swordsmanship for the role. Though she only has one scene in "Aida" to utilize this skill, Castro is the type of actress who wants to be excellent in everything she does, even the little things.

No wonder that "Miss Saigon" composer Claude-Michel Schonberg has dubbed the singer his "Miracle from Manila." Castro was Lea Salonga's replacement in that musical after the latter finished her contract.

"In The Heights," on the other hand, tells the story of a vibrant community in New York's Washington Heights neighborhood. To quote the release, it is a community "on the brink of change, full of hopes, dreams and pressures, where the biggest struggles can be deciding which traditions you take with you, and which ones you leave behind." Like "Aida," the musical will be staged at Carlos P. Romulo Auditorium but from Sept. 2 to 18, 2011.

Castro would like to record a pop album while she's here and if offered to do one. "Miss Saigon" folded up years ago but Castro has moved on to other shows that have honed her singing skills even more. Before flying to Manila, she has been touring with a group that puts on a show featuring a repertoire of songs from hit Broadway shows.

Recall, too, that Castro recorded a duet with Enrique Iglesias titled "You're My Number One." She also did concerts in Manila and Tokyo with Russell Watson in 2005; and was hailed Best Interpreter in the "First Asia Song Festival" in Bali, Indonesia. She recently recorded demo tracks for the upcoming West End musical "Sacrifice."

For more information about "Aida" and "In The Heights," call Atlantis Productions at 892-7078 Or 840-1187.

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