

ENTERTAINMENT

Two of my favorite leading ladies

By Bobby Garcia (The Philippine Star) Updated June 19, 2011 12:00 AM Comments (0)



Ima Castro (left) and Rachel Alejandro, stars of Atlantis Productions' *Aida*: They up everyone's game at rehearsals.

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MANILA, Philippines - Having worked in theater for almost 20 years, there are people I like to work with and people I don't. I guess it is true of any profession. You gravitate towards people who have similar sensibilities as you, inspire you by their creativity and talent, and treat theater and the process of creating a show with the respect and reverence it deserves.

I am thrilled that two of my favorite leading ladies are both appearing in *Aida*, which is being directed by Chari Arespacochaga. Atlantis Productions has longer planned to do *Aida*, but for one reason or another, it kept getting pushed back. Now, I am thrilled that it is finally taking to the stage with a stellar cast that will do justice to Elton John and Tim Rice's phenomenal Tony Award-winning pop rock score. I am even more thrilled that the two female lead roles, *Aida* and *Amneris*, will be played by two of my favorite leading ladies of the stage — Ima Castro and Rachel Alejandro.

I first met Ima in 2000 when she auditioned for the Manila engagement of *Miss Saigon*. Of course, I had heard her sing before, and at that time we were both managed by Boy Abunda, so I knew of her when she walked into the audition hall. But when she opened her mouth to sing, it was then and there that I realized she had one of the most exciting musical instruments I had heard. We cast Ima in a chorus role and selected her to understudy the role of Kim. When Lea Salonga's contract was up and returned to *Broadway* to close the New York production, I selected Ima to take on the role of Kim. With very little time to rehearse her, I took Ima through all the blocking, quick changes and sat her down to talk about the character. Ima, being the pro that she is, had already mastered the music but had never sung the score with a full orchestra. But because of schedules and costs, her first run with an orchestra would be with an audience, too — her first performance of Kim before paying crowd. I wasn't worried though. Watching her bring new life to Kim in rehearsals, I knew Ima was more than capable of handling the pressures a role of this magnitude brings to its performance.

Ima blew audiences away and put her own stamp on Kim. The rest, as they say, is history. She would move on to play Kim in the Asian tour followed by the UK tour of *Miss Saigon* where *Miss Saigon* composer Claude-Michel Schonberg saw her perform and dubbed her his "miracle from Manila." When we were looking for a singer to lend her voice to the demo recordings of *Sacrifice*, a new musical I am working on the West End, the first name that came to mind was Ima. And she sang the *Sacrifice* songs brilliantly. I am thrilled that she is back in Manila after a 10-year absence to take on the title role in *Aida* followed by Vanessa in the Tony Award-winning musical *In the Heights*, which opens in September.

Ima possesses all the qualities you look for in a [musical theater](#) leading lady. A spell-binding voice that thrillingly tells a story with emotional punch, a work sensibility that sets the standard for the cast, and a generosity and kindness that infects everyone around her. Ima is the real deal. I hope that she stays in Manila longer, or comes back every year to share her talent on the local stage.

Aida marks Rachel Alejandro's fourth leading lady role in an Atlantis show. Clearly, she is one of our favorite people to work with. She earned rave reviews as [Mimi Marquez](#) in the Singapore and Manila runs of *Rent* in 2001, garnered even greater praise and an Aliw award for her performance as Kate Monster/Lucy The Slut in three runs of *Avenue Q* and then brought the house down with her comic skills as Clio/Kira in two runs of *Xanadu*. Rachel is perhaps one of the most consistent performers I have worked with. A perfectionist by nature, Rachel constantly strives to get everything right. And when something goes wrong, she is the first to get frustrated. She is also a pro in every sense of the word. Early for rehearsals and always prepared for the days work, you will never find her complaining that she is too tired or that there was "too much traffic" to get to rehearsals on time. Add to that one of the best voices in the Philippine music industry and you have a leading lady I wish I could be in every show we do.

Rachel has also been very vocal about how musical theater has become her true calling. Having done almost everything in the entertainment industry, it is on the stage that she feels most at home. The role she plays, *Amneris*, is a dream role for her that she fell in love with when she first saw the [Broadway production](#).

But *Aida* is also a farewell of sorts for Rachel. For a while, at least. She will be moving to New York with her husband Carlos Santamaria

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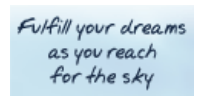
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right after *Aida* closes. As much as I will miss her, I am excited for all the possibilities ahead of her. Without a doubt with her talent and credentials, I am sure Rachel will find exciting work in New York City. While we will miss her in Manila, we wish her all the best as she pursues new dreams in the Big Apple.

Working with these two ladies spoils you. I have heard from director Chari, that they up everyone's game at rehearsals. They are also great role models for the younger members of the cast of *Aida*. Their professionalism and talent serve as a reminder that it is possible to commit to one thing and give it all your heart and soul. Really, for those of us who work in theater, that is what it is all about above all else. We are constantly in service of the story. To tell it as best as possible and for it to be the focus of our lives for those precious moments that we live with the show we are working on. And no rivalries here either. Both singers have a deep and genuine respect for each other. That only comes when you have confidence in your own skills and a generosity to let the other shine when they need to. How great is that?

I have no doubt that Ima and Rachel will light up the stage together in *Aida*. Supported by a powerhouse cast, they will tell one of the most romantic love stories ever written. I can't wait to see them perform and I hope you all join us for this exciting new musical.

Aida runs from June 24 to July 10 at the Carlos P. Romulo Auditorium, RCBC Plaza, Makati City. It is directed by Chari, choreography by Cecile Martinez, [lighting design](#) by Dong Calingacion, set design by Faust Peneyra, costume design by Twinkle Zamora, musical direction by Jojo Malferari and vocal direction by ManMan Angsico.

For tickets, call Atlantis Productions at 892-7078 or Ticket World at 891-9999.

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BANGKOK — Newly-wed Rachel Alejandro and Spanish journalist Carlos Santamaria were on honeymoon mode (they still are!) when they treated my friend Raoul Tidalgo (formerly of the New York-based *The Filipino Reporter*) and me to a dimsum dinner at the Chinese restaurant of Arnoma Hotel one drizzly evening.

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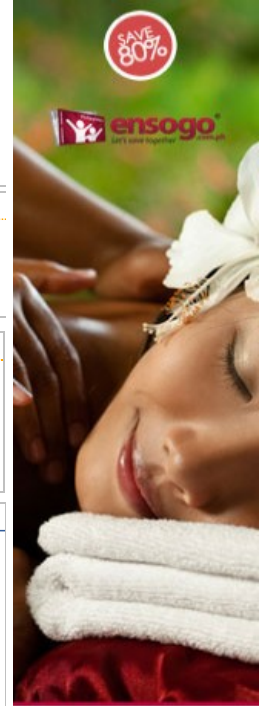
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