

Lea SALONGA

THE ICONIC SINGER AND ACTRESS PLEDGES ALLEGIANCE TO BROADWAY IN HER LONG-AWAITED RETURN TO THE STAGE.

story Teena Apeles photo Emily Clay

▶▶▶ Lea Salonga was just 20 when she graced the Broadway stage in 1991 with her Tony Award-winning debut as Kim in *Miss Saigon*. Of course, she had already been a bona fide star since the age of 7 in the Philippines, where millions embraced a voice so beautiful that it uplifted all who heard her. And once American audiences got a taste of that voice, they couldn't get enough. Salonga landed the ultimate singing gig — as a Disney princess — twice, first as Jasmine in 1992's *Aladdin*, then as Mulan in the eponymous 1998 film, and she wowed audiences in the Broadway productions of *Les Misérables* (starting in 1993 and periodically through 2001) and the *Flower Drum Song* in 2002.

Much has happened to the performer since: marriage, the birth of her daughter, numerous accolades, a Goodwill Ambassador appointment, sold-out concerts all over the world, including a 2014 tour with Il Divo and, more recently, serving as a judge on the megahit talent shows *The Voice Philippines* and *The Voice Philippines Kids*. But now the stage that brought her international fame beckons again: This fall, Salonga returns to Broadway to star in the musical *Allegiance*, after its successful 2012 run at the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego, California, and she can't wait.

What makes *Allegiance* really special, the singer notes, is that it's "absolutely from the ground up: an original musical inspired by somebody who is so beloved in the Asian American acting community." It is a play "the community can truly own: One of the writers is Asian American, our composer-lyricist is Asian American, our director is Asian American — it is amazing that this show is taking place and that I get to be in it."

Starring and inspired by the childhood of actor, activist and social media juggernaut George Takei (*Star Trek*,

Heroes), *Allegiance* is a family story set against the backdrop of a very dark time in American history. "There are circumstances outside their control that threaten to pull them all apart," says Salonga. Those circumstances include the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese that later prompted the internment of more than 100,000 Japanese Americans, including, in real life, Takei's family.

"*Allegiance* is a very specific story about a specific Japanese American family from Salinas, California, who get rounded up by soldiers to live for five years behind barbed wire fences," says Salonga, who plays Kei, the sister of Sam Kimura (played by Telly Leung), the character based on Takei. "And because of what happens within the family dynamics, you will find something to relate to, no matter how specific it is." While this covers a harrowing time for that community, "it lends itself to some pretty amazing emotional moments, it lends itself to some really good songs, and I am lucky to sing them."

Two songs were written with Salonga in mind. There is "'Gaman,' a Japanese word of Buddhist origin, which means holding your head high, being resilient even in the face of the most extreme circumstances and keeping your dignity," she explains. "It is the one song in the entire show that has actually survived through every single reading, workshop, lab and production." The second song is "Higher," which was written, composed and initially performed at the Old Globe.

The role itself was meant for her; Salonga didn't have to audition. "I really like her as a character, as a human being," she says. In the story, Kei becomes the de facto caretaker of Sam after the loss of their mother, which causes friction between the two. "I like

her because she keeps on growing. Once they are rounded up by the soldiers and thrown in the internment camp, this is when she starts to bloom. This is when she no longer has to take care of her family, this is when she falls in love [and] when she starts making decisions that affect so many other people including herself. And it is a test of her own character and her strength."

When asked if much has changed in terms of opportunities for Asian actors on Broadway since she first started out, Salonga says that roles are still hard to come by 24 years later. "When *Miss Saigon* opened on Broadway, it was a pretty big deal, because I think it was the largest Asian cast. *The King and I* is on now, and [the large Asian cast] is a pretty big deal again. But the thing that is a point of frustration is that there still aren't a whole lot of Asian actors who are hired on a regular basis to be in shows." Though she says the changes aren't happening quickly enough, she does admit that change *is* happening, acknowledging that with the opening of *Allegiance*, there will be two shows on Broadway where the majority of the actors are of Asian descent.

And for those who are wondering what co-star George Takei is really like, Salonga confirms that "he is amazing, one of the funniest guys I ever met. And the man has a six-pack, which is jarring, as he is 78 years old." She speaks of how wonderful it is that the actor has emerged as a social media powerhouse over the last few years. "I think he got on social media in order to talk about *Allegiance*, and it turned into something even bigger. It turned into a platform for his activism."

Salonga herself has almost 3 million followers on Twitter, and she understands the power of that: "It can be useful if I have an opinion that I want to



express,” calling it a kind of double-edged sword. “My husband tells me, ‘You say something on social media, somebody will react. It is not just going to be left alone, and it is going to turn into something.’ So I have to be able to stand by every single tweet without apologizing for anything.” This includes tweets supporting marriage equality, for which she received both derision and support. “You will get people who will totally slam you for something you have said, but in the same breath you will get people who support you for a cause that you are championing. And it is just one of those things where you just kind of have to roll with the punches.”

The same goes for her life, which she calls “a juggling act with many balls in the air,” now that she’s a mother. But “this is my work, and this is what I love to do.” Having a management company to keep everything straight has helped to not book her so much that she loses precious time with her family. So every potential commitment is weighed. “It has to be something pretty worthwhile in order for me to pack up and leave,” she says. “And a Broadway show where a very important story is going to be told that will really impact the Asian American theatrical community, I think, is a really important thing to do.”

Her throngs of fans, who anxiously await her return, concur, as they look forward to that curtain rising to hear her voice lift their spirits once again.

Allegiance starts its run on October 6 at the Longacre Theatre in New York.