

LIFE IS A FAIRYTALE

LEA SALONGA LIVES A FAIRYTALE MOST EVERY NIGHT, BUT BEHIND THIS FANTASY IS ALSO A REAL-LIFE CINDERELLA STORY.

ONCE UPON A time there was a little Filipino girl who, from the tender age of ten, was regularly invited to a palace by a President and First Lady to sing for visiting heads of state. Not ten years later, her talent catapulted her into the international limelight, winning her the highest honor Broadway can bestow.

Almost two decades later in Manila, hometown heroine Lea Salonga recently dazzled at the opening night of *Cinderella*, delighting an audience that included the same former First Lady of the Philippines, Madame Imelda Marcos.

Reflecting on that evening, Lea recalls, "Opening nights are more the start of something, from where more work follows. It's a night to celebrate, but I guess I don't enjoy them as much as I probably should, because I know that I have a show the next night, and the next, and for many more weeks thereafter. My more responsible side probably takes over. Plus, it was raining!"

PRINCE CHARMING

Virtually every night, Salonga's Cinderella finds her prince charming, but it was on January 10, 2004, to be exact, that Lea herself married the man of her dreams, Robert Charles Chien, whom she met while she was performing in *Flower Drum Song* (no word whether or not their wedding night limousine turned into a pumpkin at midnight). Beautiful, talented and successful, it isn't surprising Lea would one day find her prince too, but did she kiss many frogs along the way?

"Oh, all of them were princes in their own way," Lea says. "There was something good from each of them to take a lesson in life, so I have no regrets about dating any of them. Of course, it must be said that the man I did marry is truly a prince among men. I think he and I both knew from very early on in our relationship that we were meant to be together for the long haul; being with him always felt so easy, never ever difficult. We just hit it off well from our first date onwards, and it was on that date that I knew this would be something very special."

TIME FOR ROMANCE

Her idea of a romantic evening or weekend "can be anything from a nice night at a swanky hotel to a candlelit dinner at a romantic restaurant, a getaway at a peaceful resort, or a couple's massage. It can be



anything." Perhaps lamenting that she and Robert don't get as many romantic weekends together as they would like to, Lea explained, "We're both extremely busy people, but while we're young we should (I think) pursue our careers aggressively, mindful that we are parents of a lovely two-and-a-half-year-old girl. We do have a wonderful family life, but love our work too. I encourage and support him 100 percent to pursue his career path."

Robert is Chinese-Japanese and the managing director of a software company in Los Angeles where the couple now live, raising Beverly Nicole, named after Lea's late mother-in-law.

ACCOLADES GALORE

As for Lea's career path, it was in 1991 that she won the Tony Award for Best Actress in a Musical for her portrayal of Kim in *Miss Saigon*, also taking home the Drama Desk, Oliver, Outer Critics and Theatre World Awards – the first performer to win so many international awards for a single role and, later, the first Asian to play Eponine in the musical *Les Misérables* on Broadway.

"It's been a lot of fun, and quite an adventure performing all over Asia," Lea says. "Touring is something I've never done, not at this level and to this extent, and I didn't think I'd have this much fun. Having said that, it is nice to be able to settle down in one place for an entire run, but at least I don't have to deal with the New York winter. That can be brutal!"

Lea's first studio album in seven years, *Inspired*, was released in 2007 and has reached platinum status. Prior to the *Cinderella* tour she also returned to Broadway for another run of *Les Misérables*, this time as Fantine.

MENTORS AND ADVICE

A talent like Lea doesn't just invent herself, and she identifies, among her role-models, her mother "for her strength and survival, for having gone through so much, all the while retaining her sense of humor and beauty. Also a lot of my mentors and teachers (and there have been many), for pursuing their goals and dreams with excellence, and with imparting to their students (yours truly included) a great passion and love for theater, music and art. And my gorgeous friends for being themselves, doing what they believe in, for saying what they think, and for living their lives in truth and love."

If her fairytale could transport her back in time, would Lea return to one of those glass slipper moments? "I don't know whether I'd like to return to any moment in my life, good or bad. I'm quite happy remembering them from my current perspective." And any words of wisdom to her fans pursuing their own hopes and dreams? "Listen to your heart," Lea says. "And pray!"

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

As for what's next on the bubbly starlet's agenda, Lea longs to return to doing concerts. Not too long ago she generated over one million dollars in ticket sales for her eight-city US concert tour and, in 2006, sold out Carnegie Hall. "I've sort of missed that, and can't wait to go back to it. And a year or so after that, I'll be ready for another musical," she says.

Lea's determination, hard work and balanced outlook on all the things and people nearest and dearest perhaps also reveal an early prediction that – just like the storyline goes in fairytales – her life too will be one lived happily ever after. **2**

CINDERELLA IN BANGKOK

Bangkok fans can bet their bottom dollars on a thrilling experience as the Asia Tour of *Cinderella* arrives at the Muang Thai Rachadalai Theater for a stage run from December 16 to 21. Tickets are priced between 1,000 and 4,000 baht (www.thaiticketmajor.com).

