



Lea Salonga

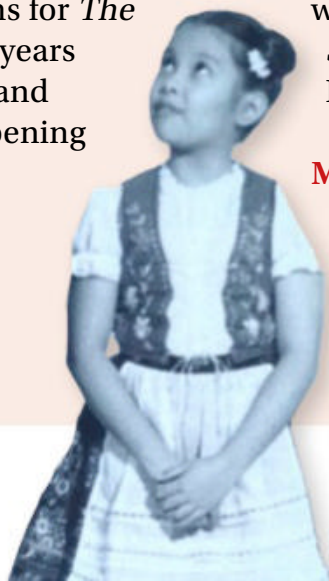
I REMEMBER...

Lea Salonga is musical royalty. A child star in the Philippines, she originated the title role in *Miss Saigon* in the West End aged 18. The role catapulted her international career and sealed her place in musical theatre history, with both Olivier and Tony Award wins. She was the first Asian actor to play both Éponine and Fantine in *Les Misérables* on Broadway and has voiced two Disney princesses

I STARTED SINGING AT FAMILY PARTIES. Then at one of these parties, one of my cousins who was very active in musical theatre told my mother I had to go to auditions for *The King and I*. I was six years old at the auditions and seven by the time opening night rolled around. That was it. I just remember feeling completely safe on stage, and happy. It

wasn't a terrifying place to be. I was having fun. I joined the Repertory Philippines company and performed in quite a few musicals. *Fiddler on the Roof* was another one and *The Sound of Music*, in which I played Brigitta.

MY BROTHER GERARD IS A COMPOSER, CONDUCTOR AND ARRANGER, so music was all around us



growing up. My mum pretty much spearheaded my career, and took care of everything. It was a pretty normal childhood though. I still attended regular school. There were piano lessons and pretty much whatever big sister does, my little brother would want to do. He wanted to take piano lessons because I did. I also took some ballet. It wasn't anything unmanageable. I recall it being pretty happy.

My parents were supportive, but like the good Asian parents they were, they emphasised the importance of getting an education and that show business was a very fickle industry. As somebody who was in the business, I saw it firsthand. There were people who were big stars one minute, and then nobodies the next.

I WENT TO UNIVERSITY TO STUDY FOR A CAREER IN MEDICINE, but clearly, the universe had other plans for me. If the showbusiness thing hadn't worked out, if, say, *Miss Saigon* didn't happen, I don't honestly know I would have continued into a serious medical career only because it's hard. It is quite challenging. I do not particularly like chemistry, and I would have had to take quite a bit of it. However, I do enjoy working with other people.

I always wonder what makes people tick. I probably would have

shifted to something more psychology-based if the show business thing hadn't worked out.

AS NERVOUS AS I WAS DURING MY AUDITION FOR MISS SAIGON,

I do remember for the most part being quite stoic. It might have confused our audition panel which was composed of Nicholas Hytner [director], Cameron Mackintosh [producer], Alain Boublil [lyricist] and Claude-Michel Schönberg [composer]. They might have been confused because they were probably expecting me to be more excited. And I wasn't. Maybe because I wasn't really all that familiar with a lot of the contemporary musical theatre that Cameron had produced,

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other than *Cats*. I was not really all that familiar with *Les Mis*, although I was already starting to study the music, as I had to for that audition.

I think one of them recalled I was just stoic, quiet, not particularly excitable and it probably was a good



Lea's incredible life on stage has led her to meeting celebrities, royals and politicians worldwide

thing. So, I didn't really go crazy with the audition process.

THANKFULLY, I HAD MY MUM LIVING WITH ME IN LONDON [DURING MISS SAIGON].

I wasn't living alone. I didn't start living alone until I was around 27 or 28. It wasn't until then that it really felt like there wasn't a part of home with me. But it was definitely a growing up stage one needs to go through to know you'll be able to survive on your own.

The adjustment period wasn't so crazy, but I did have to learn some "adulthood" as the kids call it these days! Writing a cheque for the first time or learning how to use a washing machine, making sure I got to rehearsals on time, things like that. I think my mum helped me with some of it, but there was some I had to pretty much do on my own.

I WAS THE FIRST ASIAN ACTOR TO PERFORM THE ROLE OF ÉPONINE [LES MISÉRABLES] ON BROADWAY IN 1993.

I only really became familiar with *Les Mis* when I started working on the audition process for *Miss Saigon*. I very quickly became obsessed. What *Wicked* was to a generation of musical theatre goers, or what *Hamilton* is right now, that was *Les Mis* for me. I'm sure to this day, I can remember the majority of the lyrics.

The first run [on Broadway] was like an experiment, I think, for

I QUICKLY BECAME OBSESSED WITH *LES MISÉRABLES*—WHAT *HAMILTON* IS TO THEATRE GOERS NOW, *LES MIS* WAS FOR ME

everybody. Because none of us, not Cameron, not Richard J Alexander, not even me, knew what the effect of this was going to be. Or if we were even going to be able to pull it off. We didn't know. All we knew was I was being hired for January to March, which is customarily a tough time on Broadway because nobody comes to New York. It's cold and there are blizzards. It was like, *OK, let's see if this is going to work.*

I felt probably more pressure in anticipation for doing Éponine, compared to doing Kim in *Miss Saigon*. Kim is an Asian role, I'm an Asian actor, this was not going to be a hard sell. But putting an Asian actor into a role that is normally inhabited by Caucasian actors, this might have been a little more difficult to convince people of its merit. But I think we did pretty good.

Then, many years later, I got cast as Fantine in the first revival of *Les Mis*, which became populated by actors of every race, colour and



Lea in *Miss Saigon* on London's West End, 1989

creed. If they could sing it, they could be in it. It was a very, very big change from when I first did that show. It felt really powerful. It's a musical that's still very close to my heart to this day.

I HAD THE TITLE OF "DISNEY LEGEND" BESTOWED ON ME for my work as the voice of Princess Jasmine in *Aladdin* and as Fa Mulan in *Mulan* and *Mulan II*. I performed "A Whole New World" from *Aladdin* at the Academy Awards [where the song was awarded the accolade for Best Original Song]. I remember storyboards, huge orchestras, and a



smile on my face...being told by the animators (lead animator Mark Henn animated both Jasmine and Mulan) and the directors to really focus the performance on the vocals...and how the successes of those films had so much to do with the characters' strength. As for me personally, with *Mulan* it's quite an amazing thing to feel seen, seeing an animated character that looks like you doing these incredible, heroic things. The music is so fantastic. I've been



Lea in two productions of *Les Mis*, as Éponine (above) and Fantine (below)



singing both songs for around 30 years; it just doesn't get old.

I'VE MET AND PERFORMED IN FRONT OF MANY WORLD LEADERS AND FAMOUS PEOPLE.

Princess Diana definitely stands out. She came to a performance of *Miss Saigon* in aid of the Prince's Trust. It was the day before our opening. I remember her being very tall, which

I was not expecting. She towered over people. She was never like this Amazonian woman. She seemed a very delicate, soft spoken, very shy, beautiful, gorgeous woman. She was very light on her feet.

BRITISH AUDIENCES MEAN A LOT TO ME. I was recently one of the headline performers in the Sondheim tribute concert *Old*

Friends and the UK audiences were just massively amazing. Every night, it was just like, *Oh my God, why does it sound like we're at a rock concert? This is crazy!* The audiences were incredibly generous. They say it's hard to get a British audience to stand up. But every night they were on their feet. So, I'm wondering, *Are we sure that that adage is even accurate now?* We all had such a wonderful time.

IT'S VERY EXCITING TO COME BACK TO THE THEATRE ROYAL DRURY LANE, LONDON, FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 35 YEARS for my upcoming tour, *Stage, Screen and Everything In Between*. I was just there in December. I hadn't seen it since it was renovated. It was so beautiful. It was like walking in a whole different place. The renovation was absolutely stunning. That theatre holds such special memories of *Miss Saigon*, which changed my life. It really was the

start of what has now become a really lovely global career.

MY TOUR WILL INCLUDE SONGS FROM THROUGHOUT MY CAREER.

Stage and screen are already covered by the two Disney films, *Les Mis* and *Miss Saigon*. There's definitely more musical theatre we'll get in there too. As for "everything in between", it means jazz, it means pop. There will probably be a musical theatre song given a treatment of something that is not necessarily thought of as musical theatre. I just get to have myself a good time! ■

As told to Jeremy Blackmore

Lea Salonga will tour her career-spanning show *Stage, Screen and Everything In Between* in June and July, appearing in venues all across the UK. The tour will also see her return to the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, London. For tickets, go to cuffeandtaylor.com



World Bee Day

To raise awareness of the importance of bees and other pollinators (such as butterflies and bats), the threats they face and their contribution to sustainable development, the UN designated May 20 as World Bee Day. We all depend on pollinators so it is crucial to halt the loss of biodiversity

SOURCE: UN.ORG/EN/OBSERVANCES/BEE-DAY