

Actress, Broadway star and theatre producer Liz Casasola

# The total Pinay performer

by CYNTHIA DE CASTRO / AJPress

“BORN in Los Angeles, CA but in the house, raised in the Philippines.” That’s how Broadway and TV actress, theatre producer Elizabeth “Liz” Casasola describes herself.

“My parents raised me with old-fashioned, traditional Filipino values. They instilled in me the importance of knowing one’s history and roots. Even though we were born in the States, they spoke to us in Tagalog (the Filipino language) at home,” said Liz.

Casasola is playing the role of Cory Aquino in New York’s first Filipino themed musical, *IMELDA*, A New Musical, which premiered last Sept 30 at the Julia Miles Theatre in 424 West 55th Street, New York. The musical is on a limited engagement until October 18, 2009. The musical spans the 1940s to 1980s, the pivotal years after the Philippines gained its independence.

Liz talks about her role in the musical excitedly. “I have the honor of playing Corazon Aquino, a woman of incredible faith, courage and strength—and the first female President of the Philippines, as well as Asia’s first female President! I am excited to play someone who is so incredibly complex. She was a wife to Ninoy Aquino as well as a mother to five children. When Ninoy was assassinated, she turned to God for guidance, which ultimately, combined with her own conviction and self-belief, gave her the strength to run for President against Ferdinand Marcos and carry out Ninoy’s vision. To go from a self-proclaimed “plain housewife” to the President of the Philippines will be a challenge I’m looking forward to playing,” Liz said in an interview before the opening night of the musical.

With the Philippines now undergoing a second wave of “Cory Fever” since the recent death of Cory, Filipinos would most certainly love the role Liz plays in the New York musical. Liz herself shared that the best song for her in the musical is Cory Aquino’s song—*Myself, My Heart*. “The journey she goes through in that song is incredible. To see Cory go from her immense



sadness at her husband’s funeral, to finding the strength within herself to lead the Philippine people to democracy... all in ONE SONG, is quite amazing. Not only that, but it’s a beautiful, powerful ballad—and we all know how much Filipinos love their angst-filled, power ballads,” Liz shared.

Liz received her BA in Mass Communications from the University of California, Berkeley. She is also a graduate of the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco and the American Musical & Dramatic Academy in New York City. She has appeared in *Miss Saigon*, *Jessica Hagedorn’s Dogeaters* at The Public Theatre, Pulitzer Prize Winner John Marans’ musical, *Searching for Y, Shout!S* and *Sweet Valley High: The Musical*. On television, Liz has appeared in *Sex and the City*, *Saturday Night Live* and co-hosted a pilot for *Rollingstone.com*. Liz is the voice behind MCI Worldcom’s radio advertising campaign.

She co-produced DCT’s critically acclaimed benefit at Carnegie Hall featuring Tony Award winner Lea Salonga and guest artists Liz Callaway, Andrea McArdle and Paolo Montalban in November 2005, which *Playbill’s* Andrew Gans declared “a triumph!” It was named in the Top 10 Best of 2005.

Liz says that “being Filipino is something that I am incredibly proud of and it is a huge part of my identity here in America. When I attended college at the University of California, Berkeley, the pride and passion for being Filipino continued. I was a part of PAA (Pilipino American Alliance) where we discussed Filipino-American issues. We put on an annual student-run show, PCN (Pilipino Cultural Night) to celebrate our Philippine heritage—complete with a script, cultural dances and songs. I also taught a Ta-

galog conversational class while in college. Expressing myself as a Filipino was a huge part of my college experience.”

When Liz left California and moved to New York 10 years ago to attend The American Musical and Dramatic Academy, she admitted that she initially felt lost, missing the same sense of Filipino community she had in college. “It was extremely difficult leaving California where I had this (Filipino) “family,” to a city where I barely knew a soul. After several months, I slowly started meeting new people, and discovered the thriving Filipino community here in NYC. Those first few lonely months were humbling to the say the least, but gave me a greater appreciation for my newfound friendships. There’s something about being with Filipinos that just feels like being home. A passion of mine is connecting Filipinos to each other here in NYC,” said Liz.

When asked how she got into the theatre, Liz shared, “I grew up watching musicals on TV—*Sound of Music*, *King and I*, *Grease*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*—my sister and I would record it off the TV and play it every single day and memorize all the words. My parents were also subscribers to the Long Beach Civic Light Opera. It was always a big event when we went to watch a show—we would get all dressed up, have dinner at a nice restaurant, and watch the show. The funny thing was, by the time we were watching the show, my parents and younger sister would all be asleep, and I’d be the only one still awake—mesmerized by the lights, costumes, singers, and dancers in the show.”

“However, I had a definitive moment when I knew I wanted to be in musical theater—and that is when I played a 2-cassette tape given to me by a friend—it was the *Miss Saigon* soundtrack. I was completely blown away by the score, and particularly, the lead actress, Lea Salonga. I was inspired by her voice and passion just from hearing the recording. My sister and I would play the soundtrack, and act out the scenes, even though we had never seen the show! (For some reason, she played Kim, the lead actress, and I was always Chris, the GI soldier—probably because I had a lower voice!).”

Liz admits that Lea Salonga became an inspiration for her. “When Lea won the Tony, it was inspiring to Filipinos everywhere that you can achieve your dreams. Then, when I moved to NYC in 1998, I met Lea through a mutual friend—and to this day, she is like a big sister and mentor to me. It’s funny how my life has come full circle in that respect.”

Liz has only been to the Philippines twice in her life, in 1981 and 1995, but those two visits have given her a better appreciation of her roots and her people, and much gratitude for her

parents and the way they raised her and her sister. She shared, “every time I visit, I am so incredibly humbled to see how my parents grew up. It’s a huge part of who I am today. I still have so many relatives living there. Visiting the Philippines reminds me that there is so much beauty in simplicity. Life is appreciated there on a very fundamental level—food, shelter, family...that’s all you really need in life. It also made me realize the sacrifices my parents made to give their 2 daughters the “American Dream”. They came to the US in 1972, the day before Marshall Law was declared. A friend of theirs in the government advised them to get out of the Philippines as soon as possible. To this day, my mom gets emotional talking about the day they became US citizens—holding their right hand up, reciting the American Oath of Allegiance—the feeling of hope, possibility and a new life was overwhelming. And although they were now living in the States, my parents would send money home to those still in the Philippines. “Family comes first”—one of the many invaluable lessons I have learned from my parents.”

Although born and raised in America, Liz shared that her parents instilled in them a passion and love for the Philippines. Liz and her sister grew up watching videos and documentaries on Philippine history. “One particular video stands out in my mind—and that was a documentary on the Marcos Regime into Cory Aquino’s presidency. I was so incredibly fascinated by that part of our history! That is one of the reasons I am so proud to be a part of *Imelda*—I had always been captivated by that part of our history. I am so grateful my parents raised me with such a strong awareness of our culture,” said Liz, one passionate Pinay, much like the character she plays magnificently, Cory Aquino.

Readers near New York shouldn’t miss seeing Liz Casasola as Cory in *Imelda, the New Musical*. For tickets and show schedules, contact Julia Miles Theatre in 424 West 55th Street, New York. ■



Galing Pinoy showcases the triumph of the Filipino spirit - the Filipino's innate perseverance to rise above. A double entendre, Galing Pinoy literally translates to both coming from (or brought to you by) the Filipino and Filipino ingenuity.



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