

Miss Cupid on a high note

On stage and off, Lea Salonga mesmerizes, as longtime fan Gal Roma finds out yet again

To celebrate Valentine, people do different things to show their affection. The extravagant would travel to romantic places like Paris or Venice, while some would wine and dine, watch a movie, or buy cards, gifts and flowers for their beloved.

A good friend of mine and I decided to do something different. We treated ourselves to a pre-Valentine musical concert of the Philippines' very own, internationally acclaimed, Lea Salonga. We thought it was the best Valentine celebration we ever had.

The concert, held at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre Concert Hall, featured Salonga as "The Voice of Mulan", following her stint as the singing voice of the character Mulan in a Disney film of the same title.

But when she came out and rendered her first song "Go the Distance" from the movie Hercules, I thought she should have been showcased as "The Voice." Period.

Salonga's voice is pure and captivating; she interprets each song in her repertoire as if she's performing in a theatrical stage. From my seat near the stage, I could see the audience waiting with bated breath for her powerful voice to hit the high notes.

She does not disappoint. With each song (from selected Disney films and Broadway musicals), she reaches the depths of her audience's inner core, entertaining them with her mesmerizing voice.

When she sang "I'd Give My Life For You" from "Miss Saigon", I was transported back to the Cultural Centre of the Philippines, where I first watched her perform the lead role of Kim in the musical, during its Manila staging eight years ago.

This time, backed by the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of her brother, Gerard Salonga, the "Disney princess" performed for more than two hours, setting the mood for Valentine with her jazzy encore: "Smoke Gets In



Lea Salonga obliges fans with her autograph and makes time (inset) to give me something for my scrap book.

Your Eyes" and "Someone to Watch Over Me".

That's why she is a world-class and multi-awarded singer who has graced the big stage of the concert world, including Carnegie Hall in New York. She has won the Tony Award, Outer Critics Circle Award, The Drama Desk Award and the Laurence Olivier Award.

She has also sung before five Philippine presidents (Ferdinand Marcos, Cory Aquino, Fidel Ramos, Joseph Estrada and Gloria Arroyo) and three US presidents (President George W Bush and his father and former president Bill Clinton). Add to that the performances for Queen Elizabeth II and the late Princess Diana.

Salonga's achievement as a singer is followed by fans – Filipinos and foreigners alike – all over the world.

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She debuted on the professional stage at the age of seven through the musical "The King and I" by the Repertory Philippines. Following her stint in "Annie", Salonga embarked on a long but fruitful musical journey that took her all the way to Broadway and Hollywood.

She was only 17 when she won the lead role in Miss Saigon. Her audition piece "On My Own" from "Les Misérables" wowed the producers; no time was missed to cast her and bring her to London to perform the coveted role.

Turning 37 this February, Salonga is showing no signs of slowing down. She just wrapped up her stint in "Les Misérables" in New York and will soon be embarking on a 39-week tour of Asia and the Philippines, performing the lead role in "Cinderella."

I couldn't let it pass without comment, so here goes ...

Gabby Alvarado in Hong Kong

The long Chinese New Year holidays were an ideal time for an overdue date with the missus. She left the tsikitings with their lola and flew in from Manila for an extended pre-Valentine tryst with the hubby.

The missus came to see Lea Salonga in concert. And for 2 ½ hours, "the voice of Mulan" held both of us spellbound.

After Lea's opening number, "Go the Distance" from the Disney movie Hercules, I whispered I was light-hearted enough to go home. That song alone, I said, was worth the HK\$646 we paid for our balcony seats.

Lea's concert makes one proud to be a Filipino. It also proves how the arts can move, even lift, the human spirit. Seeing the well-groomed musicians of the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra take their cue from Lea's animated brother, Maestro Gerard, in his Converse sneakers, left a huge impression on my friend Dodo Catacutan, who accompanied us that night.

And then there was Lea, of course, in what one lady in the audience described as a "polished" performance.

It might not have been Lea at her best – she's had countless performances before in bigger settings like Broadway – but she glowed on that stage like the rarest of gems. Lea had everyone hanging on every note as she took the audience on a musical journey.

I made a promise to just sit back and enjoy the concert without writing about it. But I couldn't help myself.

Seeing a world-class artist, indeed a Filipino, cast her spell on an appreciative sold-out crowd of mostly foreigners, on a stage away from home, can make you forget a solemn vow.

Chilling out in Water Cube worth the trip in the cold

Waking up early on a chilly Saturday morning, traveling for more than 30 minutes, finally finding a suitable parking space in the middle of a construction area, and walking down the road in sub-zero temperature with our children in tow were all worth our effort in our desire to be one of the first to experience how it feels like to be inside the Water Cube.

The Water Cube, as the National Aquatics Center is popularly known, was officially inaugurated on January 28 and will be the venue for swimming, synchronized swimming and diving competitions for the 2008 Olympic Games here in Beijing. So when the opportunity to purchase tickets for the China Open Swimming Competition came, we made sure not to miss the event. The China Open was the first test event in the Water Cube, barely a week after its inauguration.

The Water Cube is situated right beside the Bird's Nest, as Beijing's Olympic Stadium is nicknamed. We

CHINAHAND letter from beijing

Doris Novicio



can't help but simply stare in awe and be mesmerized as we walked towards Beijing's latest architectural marvels. Strolling along and standing amidst these two symbolic structures was almost like having a feel of the excitement of the upcoming Olympic Games, except that it was freezing that day. The Water Cube boasts an imposing bubble-like structure from the outside, which, according to descriptions, changes its hues to red, green and pink when lit at night. While the façade and vacant spaces around the Cube still need finishing touches, work is almost done inside, save for some additional stalls for the gift and snacks shops, and perhaps

more indoor ornaments. Most of the staff who assisted us from the entrance, through security up to our seats spoke good English, the toilets were clean, and signages for directions were clear.

We thought that these are all indications of better, if not much improved service during the actual Games.

The main attractions were the state-of-the-art pool and diving platforms and a gallery that sits more than 15,000 spectators. It is said that the quality of water in the pools are almost potable while the

whole structure itself lives up to the standard of an environment-friendly venue, where sophisticated energy saving equipment and expertise will be used and applied, especially during the Games.

The China Open Swimming Competition was participated in by more than 35 teams – Mexico, Germany, Poland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea and China to name a few. By gleaning at the flags displayed representing participating countries, our son was a bit disappointed to learn that there were no competitors from the Philippines.

So in most events, we ended up cheering "go, go China," which majority of the audience chanted in their native Mandarin, while some proudly waved their flags. During each award ceremony, we couldn't help but share in the pride of the winners.

Our experience that Saturday already gave us a sneak peak of how events will take place inside the Water Cube, come August.

And while we are still hoping to get tickets for any of the swimming competitions for the actual events, another wonderful, pre-Olympic event we look forward to the grand opening of the Bird's Nest scheduled for next month.

The Bird's Nest will be the venue for the opening and closing ceremonies (which we are resigned to watch on television) and most competitions in athletics, as well.

In the meantime, we are on the alert for further announcements on ticket sales for test events in the Bird's Nest.

