

ON THE SCENE

WITH JOHN BERGER

Kristian Lei

Kristian Lei was 3 years old when her family moved from Manila to Waiānae. Growing up on the West Side she learned how to fight while defending her younger brother from bullies, and she immersed herself in the various island cultures she found in the neighborhood.

Lei was a year out of Waiānae High School when a friend at Leeward Community College invited her to an audition for roles in a national touring company. Her only reason for being there was to support her friend, but when the producers asked her to sing, she did. And, when one of them told her she should take singing lessons, she took his advice. A little more than a year later, Kristian Lei was starring as Kim in the German production of "Miss Saigon." More than 20 years later music is still her calling.

Lei, 40, was onstage earlier this month playing Kei Kimura in Manoa Valley Theatre's Hawaii-premiere production of "Alliance." She makes her debut as a showroom entertainer April 24 at the Blue Note Waikiki.

Hawaii knows you as a stage performer who sings Broadway hits, and as the producer of Broadway-theme musical fundraisers. How is that going to fit into a showroom setting?

I'm still going to be bringing the elements of Broadway, but growing up I had lots of mentors even though I didn't know I'd be a singer. So I want to honor them somehow with some of the (other) songs. I'll do my best to entertain everyone with the Broadway culture, the Hawaiian culture, my Filipino roots and the music I learned in Germany and Italy. And I want to get my originals out there.

Going back to "Miss Saigon" — what were the biggest differences between Hawaii and Germany for you?

It was the first place I had ever slept over, other than my own home — that's how sheltered I was growing up. Other than that, it was the weather and the food. The sausages and the schnitzel. Lots of mashed potatoes, not much rice. And there was no Spam.

When you were playing Kim at 19 you were singing about a mother's love for her child. How does it feel to sing "I'd Give My Life for





You now that you have a child of your own?

When I was playing Kim then I already had the experience of raising my younger brother, so I could relate to caring for a young boy, but now — having my child, Diamond, from my own body, it takes a deeper meaning. I'd do anything for (my brother) Josh, but it's different. She depends on me. I'm her sole caregiver.

What is something about you that might surprise people?

I grew up listening to Tagalog but I didn't really speak it. Then when I was in "Saigon" a majority of the Vietnamese roles were played by Filipinas, and they all spoke Tagalog. When we'd be talking backstage, they'd be talking (in Tagalog) and I'd be answering them in English, and they'd say, "Talk Tagalog to us!" I became more conversational, and that's where I found that inner pride for being Filipino.

Is there a dream role that could get you to do another full-length musical?

Fantine from "Les Mis" ("Les Miserables.") (Her song) "I Dreamed a Dream" is the song that got me into my shows, and they say I'm at the right age for it.

What would you like to be doing in 10 years?

I still want to be singing and teaching, and I'd like to produce and direct. At one point after "Saigon" I thought, "It isn't fun anymore. I don't want to sing anymore." Then I took a month off and I realized I can't do anything else.

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