Ovation Award winner Jennifer Paz Lives the Fairytale.

Judith van Praag

It's that time of the year again for Rudolph to take you to Issaquah for a great show the whole family will enjoy. Disney's The Beauty and the Beast at the Village Theatre is a must see for all ages!

For Jennifer Paz playing the lead role in the romantic fairytale parallels real life at the moment (it goes without saying her real-life fiancé is a Beau and not a Beast). Engaged in September (to a non-actor) she celebrated Thanksgiving with her extended family (30+ of them watched "The Beauty and the Beast" on Family & Friends night).

This was after her whirlwind trip to Los Angeles —on her one day off— for the L.A. Stage Alliance Awards ceremony. Although nominated for the Ovation Award with her lead role of Kim in Miss Saigon at the Civic Light Opera of South Bay Cities, Paz had not planned to attend the event.

"A director friend in L.A. practically ordered me to come and celebrate the artists in our theater community." Paz says.

The Philippines born, Renton raised actress was so astonished by the honor bestowed on her by Los Angeles peers, she hadn't even prepared a speech.

"I was glad to share the stage with the presenters. John Cho and I, we've known each other since my early theater days in L.A., and Zachary Quinto … When I returned to Seattle my girlfriend (who watched the ceremony on YouTube) said: "You got to hug Sylar of Heroes!"

In the fifteen years that lie between the First National Tour of Miss Saigon in which Paz starred, and her more recent performances at South Bay Cities, her voice and acting abilities have matured tremendously.

"Back then critics commented on rawness, and honest emotion. Now they remark upon the stillness and integrity in my performance."

Her start as a musical star has a fairytale touch to it. During her first year in college, Jennifer Paz studied acting, and performed with Sining Kilusan Filipino American Theatre and the Northwest Actors Studio.

In the summer of 1992, after her first year at UW, she drove to Vancouver B.C. for what she calls "a cattle call", to audition for the Miss Saigon show that was to open in Toronto in 1993. When the casting directors noticed she was a U.S. citizen, they invited her to join the cast of the New York Broadway show, and to be the understudy for the lead role of Kim. The at the time 19 year-old college student's answer was: "I have to ask my mother."

Two days later she received the contract and a ticket in the mail. All packed to go to New York, she received a phone call. Would she like to take the lead role in the First National Tour out of Chicago? She did.

While she did study voice at Northwestern University at Chicago to prepare for the tour, Paz basically received her education in theater –on the road—while touring the country.

"We'll be in a city for three-four months, and we'll find a teacher or voice coach."

As for Belle in The Beauty and the Beast, as an ethnic performer Paz relates to the bookish outsider who has to find her way in a world where she stands out.

Her advice to young people wanting to start a career in the musical theater: "Study, study, and study. Take classes and workshops. Be persistent. There will be challenges and lean times, but roles will come around (even for ethnic performers sic) Surround yourself with likeminded inspiring fellow actors."

Or other "creatives" you could say, such as R.J. Tancioco with whom Paz created the CD "Awakening", a "labor of love", with acoustic takes on traditional musical theater songs.

Paz herself continues her education. Be it at the Beverly Hills Playhouse, by participating in Writers Boot Camp. She's interested in TV and Film work, but also in writing scenarios. One day she may finish her literature degree.

After the run of the Beauty of the Beast though, she'll return to Los Angeles where more musical theater opportunities lie ahead, and a June wedding waits to be planned. For Jennifer Paz stage role and real life are somewhat intertwined as she lives and acts her part in a fairytale romance. May all the characters, live happily ever after.

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