

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

LIFESTYLE

Editor
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Why this hotel power couple is committed to helping poor Filipinos live better

While promoting tourism, Astoria hotel and resort chain owners Jeffrey and Vivian Ng want to do something more meaningful



Astoria Hotels and Resorts president Jeffrey Ng and COO Vivian Ng lead the #SikapPinoy initiative, which helps inspire marginalized Filipinos to strive for a better life.

This couple has built from scratch one of the country's top homegrown hotel brands.

Since opening Astoria Plaza in Ortigas in 2001, Jeffrey Ng, president of Astoria Hotels and Resorts (AHR), and his wife, Vivian Ng, chief operating officer, have grown the chain to six hotels and resorts around the archipelago.

These include two city hotels, Astoria Plaza in Ortigas Center and Astoria Greenbelt in Makati; and four countryside resorts, Astoria Boracay and Astoria Current, Astoria Palawan and Astoria Bohol.

As their properties drew high occupancy rates and recognition from local and international tourists—Astoria Boracay (Station 1), Astoria Current (Boracay Station 3) and Astoria Palawan topped the 2019 TripAdvisor Travelers' Choice rankings—the Ngs

wanted to do something more meaningful.

After promoting tourism and helping spur economic growth especially in the countryside, what could be next? What could be a greater endeavor?

For Jeffrey and Vivian, the answer was to extend more help to Filipinos—the fisherfolk, farmers, indigenous people and other marginalized members of the community.

The Ng couple wanted the communities in their hotel and resort operations to benefit more from AHR corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities, such as supporting local entrepreneurship endeavors.

#SikapPinoy

It gave birth to #SikapPinoy. This passion project of the Ng couple might seem like a religious gathering or a school program because there is lively

singing, joyful dancing, delectable local dishes and constant affirmation of love for God, country and family.

Since its launch at Astoria Palawan in July 2018, the #SikapPinoy initiative has inspired hundreds of Filipinos—most of them among the poorest of the poor.

After seeing for himself how the AHR CSR activity created a positive impact on people's lives, Jeffrey announced during the Boracay leg that #SikapPinoy would be held in three sites this year.

In 2019, #SikapPinoy went to Boracay and Astoria Palawan, attended by locals and the Ati tribe in Boracay and the Batak tribe in Palawan.

#SikapPinoy also visited Manila last October, at events place Chardonnay by Astoria, with affiliate Cathay Land Inc.

The locals appreciated

luxe accommodations in the best locations





ASTORIA

Astoria Hotels and Resorts have grown to include six properties – two city hotels and four resorts, all situated in renowned locales around the country. The Astoria brand combines luxurious rooms with world-class amenities and unparalleled hospitality to make your stay truly exceptional.

Experience the best of the Philippines in lavish locations designed for perfect getaways.





#1 Astoria Current
TOP HOTELS
Philippines

#1 Astoria Palawan
HOTELS FOR FAMILIES
Philippines

#6 Astoria Palawan
TOP HOTELS
Philippines

#9 Astoria Palawan
HOTELS FOR FAMILIES
World

#11 Astoria Current
BEST SERVICE
Philippines

#12 Astoria Boracay
TOP HOTELS
Philippines

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**ASTORIA CURRENT & ASTORIA PALAWAN
TRAVEL & RESORTS**
Philippines

Mark Bautista on love: 'She has to be understanding of my situation, that I'm bisexual'

In the Tony-award-winning musical 'The Band's Visit,' he plays the flirtatious, charming younger officer

By Cora Llamas
@Inq_Lifestyle

Mark Bautista has played a diverse range of characters onstage from a love-struck college kid in 9 Works Theatrical's "Eto Na! Musikal nAPO!" to a romantic Ferdinand Marcos in the acclaimed London production of "Here Lies Love." Yet the role he essays in Atlantis Theatrical Entertainment Group's Tony-award-winning musical "The Band's Visit" may be his most complicated assignment.

In the show, with music and lyrics by David Yazbek and music by Itamar Moses, he plays the flirtatious, charming younger officer, Haled, whose one mistake sends the titular Egyptian band to a remote Israeli desert town. Surrounded by their cultural and ethnic opposites, and with no diversion in sight, the band members slowly unravel to reveal their inner secrets—to each other, and to themselves.

Bautista says of his character's predicament: "He is in an arranged marriage but he rediscovers love in Israel. He ends up giving advice about love, why it has to have the right time, and why you can't force it."

When it comes to offstage relationships, the actor wistfully admits that part of him wants to settle down with his own family.

Short but intense

He did have a short, if intense, relationship with a fellow male cast member during the US run of "Here Lies Love" in 2017. Bautista believes that their time in the musical brought them together, and the end of the run inevitably led to the breakup.

The openly bisexual actor has a few clear ideas about the kind of partner he'd like to commit to—regardless of gender. "I want someone who has to be more mature than me. *Hindi ako ang mag-aalaga*. If she's a woman, she has to be understanding of my situation, that I'm bisexual."

He is also picky about his roles and the productions he appears in. Aside from the aforementioned productions, he has played the leads in Atlantis' "The Fully Monty" in 2013 ("my first English-language musical") and Resort World Manila's "Bituing Walang Ninging" in 2014. Far from being a snob, however, Bautista confesses that he still has "fears of musical theater."

Maybe it stems from his adolescent years when, despite his excellent voice, he shied away from crowds and the spotlight. Maybe it comes from his recognition that musical theater requires a more nuanced kind of singing different from pop concerts. He says, "*Mabigat sa akin ang songs ng musical theater* in



Mark Bautista plays an Egyptian officer who experiences a crisis of love in a lonely Israeli town in "The Band's Visit."

a good way. You have to dissect them."

Trust

One thing that persuades him to take a look at the part—aside from the meatiness of the

role—are the people involved. "The Band's Visit" is one example. "I trust *direk* Bobby Garcia that if he gives you the role, *kaya mong gawin*."

A network of mutual friends and associates also

helped boost his confidence in auditioning for and landing the role of Marcos in "Here Lies Love" in 2014. After Bautista won the part, they arranged a private meeting with Marcos' widow and former first lady, Imelda, so he could ask a few questions. In the production of David Byrne and Fatboy Slim, he essayed the strongman from the time he met Imelda to his death in Hawaii.

One other memory that remains in Bautista's mind about that show is how he broke ground—without the slightest knowledge at that time.

"I played at the Royal National Theatre in London," he says, the awe ringing in his voice. "It's where the great actors like Judi Dench and Ian McKellen perform. *Maraming gusto mag-perform doon. Ang dami ko pang doubts noon*. But I did it, on the international stage."

"*Nabigyan ako ng confidence. Maraming nagtitiwala sa akin na hindi Pinoy*," he adds, referring to the predominantly Caucasian creative and production teams. Bautista would reprise the role in the Seattle Repertory Theater's run in 2017.

Regrets

There have been a few regrets along the way, like his now-famous Instagram post on how he lost the lead role in the Broadway production of "Aladdin" due to lost emails.

Bautista remains close to his widowed mom and his four siblings, two of them happily married with their own families. Partly due to Bautista's success, the family in Cagayan de Oro has come a long way from the days when they had to eke out a living after an illness debilitated their seafarer father.

As a struggling artist who needed to support the family, Bautista himself overcame his shyness to sing at bars and lounges. The desire for a better life led him to try his luck in Manila where he gained national attention in the reality TV talent search show, "Star For A Night."

He looks back: "Twenty-first birthday *ko noon. Sabi ko sa sarili ko, 'Hanggang saan ba ko? Hanggang saan ako dadalhin ng boses ko?'*"

Other dreams remain. He wants to put up his own production company one day, and compose his own music for an original Filipino musical. And his quest for a lifetime partner. "*Para saan pa ang pinaghihirapan ko?*" he muses. —CONTRIBUTED INQ

Atlantis Theatrical's "The Band's Visit" runs March 13-29 at the Carlos B. Romulo Auditorium, RCBC Plaza, Makati City; ticketworld.com.ph



"Joseph the Dreamer" runs at Maybank Performing Arts Theater until March 7.

'NEVER LOOK DOWN!'—NOT EVEN DURING A COUP D'ETAT

FROM C6 members of national media, stranded in Cebu, were also present, each one demanding to know why this was not being shown in Manila and boy, were they going to write about it! They did.

One plane

I thought it was over. It was not.

The next day, living arrangements had to be fixed again. This time around, with hotels getting too expensive, we were sent to different generous houses without a guarantee of when we would be able to leave.

Then it happened again. After everyone had been given house assignments, I stated outright: "We are leaving on Saturday at 4 p.m."

Double huh?! Where did that come from?

There was one thing I didn't realize. All the houses we were assigned to were located beside a very crucial spot: the old, original, long-closed Cebu airport.

That airport was an important part of my childhood and was beside my high school, but it had long been shut down except for hobbyists. Until that coming Friday.



Freddie Santos (left) as Jacob and Audie Gemora as Joseph in early performances of "Joseph the Dreamer"

Brother Manolo surprised us suddenly with the news that one airplane, just one, would be allowed to take off from that airstrip. And he had made sure each of us had a seat on that plane.

Departure time: 4 p.m., Saturday.

Maybe I should have been but I was not in tears when I said my prayers that night. I merely said, "Thank You"... and had one of the most restful sleep of my life.

By 2:30 p.m., we were in the old airport. By 3:30 p.m., we were checking in. By 3:50, we were boarding. By 4 p.m., we were flying home. Complete.

But that was just the journey's beginning. As they had promised, the Manila press people would not stop writing about us and next thing we knew, "Joseph, The Dreamer" would surge again and again with a persistence that sometimes leaves me in bewilderment.

It could be an earthquake this minute, a massive flood the next, a volcanic eruption tomorrow. Still... never look down.

So I keep at it. And so do many others. We do our darndest to never look down not because we're a bunch of dreamers. But because we need to keep fulfilling the dream. —CONTRIBUTED INQ

The author is one of the foremost theater directors and actors in the country.

"Joseph, The Dreamer" runs until March 7 at Maybank Performing Arts Theater, BGC. Ticketworld.com.ph

WHY THIS HOTEL POWER COUPLE IS COMMITTED TO HELPING POOR FILIPINOS LIVE BETTER

FROM C1 the following testimonies: photographer Felisa Samonte, who struggled with raising her seven children after being widowed; Bataan visual artist Alex Quizon, who recovered from 22 years of drug dependence and three stays at a rehab center; and Seth Duplito who uses dancing as a means to ward off the effects of focal epilepsy, which he has been suffering from since age 14.

Previous #SikapPinoy speakers include Lorna Tambaoan, who successfully sent her children through college by selling *turon*, and Marlon Fuentes, a car service driver who has been supporting his family even with his Tourette syndrome.

Meanwhile, attendees learned the value of cash savings from financial adviser Salve Duplito of ANC's "On the Money." The financial planner and TV host demonstrated how one can look forward to having, for instance, a million pesos or more, just by saving P20 a day.

The #SikapPinoy sessions ended with a pastor guiding the locals in affirming their faith in God.

Bearing fruit

This early, #SikapPinoy is bearing fruit. At the Astoria Palawan event, the Astoria team showed videos of how some of last year's attendees have started turning their lives around.

The wife of a fisherman from Port Barton in Palawan, for example, went into farming *lato* (seaweed). She also sells seafood daily. With more sources of income, the fisherman's family now has a few appliances and is building a larger home.

A member of Astoria Palawan's housekeeping team diligently manages her *sari-sari* and *ukay-ukay* store after work. She and



The Ng couple (center) gamely dance to the #SikapPinoy theme with locals at Astoria Boracay.



Astoria Palawan general manager Joy Suarez, Vivian Ng, Puerto Princesa Mayor Lucilo Bayron and Jeffrey Ng at the Puerto Princesa business forum



ANC's Salve Duplito with community member

her husband also run a small piggery.

Buoyed by such success stories, the power couple behind #SikapPinoy said they still want to help and do more in the next few years. Truly, #SikapPinoy's motto, "*Kung kaya niyo, kaya ko*" (If you can, I can), could not be more apt and timely.



Cultural show by the Batac tribe at Astoria Palawan