



D.C. Native Shines in Hit Broadway Musical

Posted by [Katie Byrnes](#) / 13 Dec 2016

When she was 3 years old, Karla Puno Garcia first stepped on a stage to dance. Enrolled by her parents in a beginner tap dance class in San Francisco, CA, the three year old seemed to have a natural talent for movement. Unfortunately, her first performance didnt go as planned.

Actually my first performance I peed in my costume, she says with a smile. So it was really really great.

Now, Garcia is a swing in the 11-time Tony winning show, Hamilton dancing in several shows a week. The 31-year-old from Oxon Hill, MD now has the honor of being the first Filipina cast in the show.

Dancing and theater have always been a part of her life, but one day when she was 8 her dad said, Hey you should watch this, I think you would enjoy it. It was the Tony Awards. 22 years later, she would be on the Tony Awards stage for the first time.

That same year, she got her first taste of the Broadway stage when her family went to see Crazy For You and one cast member in particular captured her attention.

There was a dancer who was tapping on her pointe shoes, she says with a tone of disbelief. I thought it was the coolest thing.

Garcia continued to dance at a dance studio in Oxon Hill, MD, where she says they were groomed to be on Broadway.

She describes her life as being similar to shows like Dance Moms.

Going to dance competitions on weekends, we would do ballet, tap, and jazz, and musical theater.

Dancing on Broadway became a real possibility when she was 12 years old and got to see her 16-year-old God-sister, Lamae Caparas, perform at the Kennedy Center in the national tour of The King and I.

It was so cool to see someone from my hometown, someone who I grew up with, shes also Filipina and so it was just a lot of parallels and I was like, I wanna do that, too. And I can do that.

Garcia never looked back.

Throughout high school, she continued to dance, and determined to be on Broadway, just like her God-sister.

After graduating from Bishop Ireton High School in Alexandria, VA, Garcia went on to NYU Tisch where she earned her BFA in dance, and a minor in journalism.

In the fall of 2006, she went to an open casting call for a new dance musical. It was her senior year at NYU Tisch.

I danced my heart out, she explains of the audition. I thought I did a really good job.

The choreographer, Maurice Hines thought she did as well, because he complimented her during the audition. Callbacks were in two days, but the days passed, and she never got a phone call. By the time the two days were over, she had accepted the fact that she wasnt quite right for the show.

This is what we were taught, sometimes you cant control things, this is [a] perfect example of that because I danced very well,"Garcia says, smiling."So maybe there was nothing more that I could do.

After accepting the rejection, she decided to check an email that she usually doesnt, and the casting agency had emailed telling her that they couldnt get ahold of her via phone.

The cellphone number on her rsum was one digit off.

She frantically called them back, they told her that Hines loved her audition, and wanted her to be in show. No callback required. And just like that, Garcia had booked her first Broadway show, Hot Feet.

Rehearsals were set to begin in February and she still had a semester left of school. So Garcia decided to take her last semester off to make her Broadway debut.

I just didnt know it would happen to me! she exclaims with a tone of surprise, of getting cast in a show before her graduation.

Rehearsals went on all through spring, and Hot Feet had its out of town opening at the Kennedy Center in April 2006, and moved to New York in May. On July 23 of that year, the show closed after 12 previews and 97 performances.

It was a huge flop, Garcia says of the short-lived show. I mean, they just released an article on like the top 20 worst shows of the century, and its definitely on there! she says laughing. It lasted pretty long for how awful it was.

Looking back on Hot Feet Garcia says it was a good experience that her first Broadway show was such a flop. She gained her Broadway equity card, and when the show closed, she knew that had had school to go back to.

Once she finished at NYU in fall of 2006, Garcia immediately started auditing for shows, and was having a difficult time. She started teaching in the tristate area, which is something a lot of performers do between shows.

But I still had a lot to learn! she exclaims.

Looking back, Garcia says that she had trouble during those months because she said Oh, Im a dancer. She continues, But you have to know how to sing. it doesnt matter if youre an amazing dancer if you cant hold your harmony, youre not going to get hired.

Finally, in the fall of 2007, she booked her first show since Hot Feet. The Radio City Christmas Show in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. During their time in the show, Karla and her roommate decided to fly up to New York for the Wicked national tour auditions. After the audition, they flew back to Florida, and the next morning, her agents called with good news - telling her that she had booked the Wicked national tour, in January of 2008.

That was huge for me.

The tour was a great experience, but she still felt like something was missing, and ended up leaving the tour after seven months. When Garcia left the show, she didnt have another gig planned, which is considered a major gamble in the theater industry.

I hadnt had my completely fulfilling Broadway experience yet, you know? Cause I had that flop, she explains with a knowing smile.

I was always thinking, Theres something else thats gonna happen.

In February of 2009, Garcia gained some fame on season 5 of the hit show So You Think You Can Dance. She was eliminated in week 4, and made connections that would help her throughout her career. After her stint on the show, booked The Radio City Christmas Show, this time in New York City.

After her dancing her way through the Christmas Show, Garcia began to tour the globe with a ballet dancer group called Bad Boys of Dance, but once again, she decided to leave after a few months.

She decided that a change of pace was necessary. So she packed her bags, and decided to move to L.A. to start over at 25 years old.

I did not like it, she says bluntly.

Then she got a phone call from a production of "West Side Story" back in New York City, and they were asking her to come back to cover a part of an ensemble member who was on vacation.

It was like New York was calling me back. Like girl what are you doing over there. You have to be here, she exclaims with a smile expanding across her face. Its like the universe telling you where youre supposed to be, when you feel lost.

After the show closed in January 2011, Garcia started to get back into choreography and building her voice. Only a few months later, she booked her next show, the national tour of The Addams Family.

Another TV opportunity came up when Garcia was on tour with The Addams Family.

The hit show SMASH was gaining popularity when the cast was on the road and they would watch it in their free time.

When she came back from The Addams Family and was eager to get in the audition room for SMASH, but her former agents said that although they had really tried to get her in the room for the audition, they were unsuccessful.

Garcia took matters into her own hands. She knew the associate choreographer, Ryan Kasprzak, from her time on So You Think You Can Dance and she texted him because she had heard there was a callback for the show. Kasprzak immediately agreed that she would be a perfect fit for the show, and soon after, Garcia's agents called with the news that she was going to be able to audition for SMASH. She got herself in the room for the audition, and was on SMASH in 2013 for 9 episodes as a dancer.

At this point, Garcia was teaching and continuing to work on choreography and building her choreographic voice.

In 2015, Garcia booked Gigi on Broadway, which led her to the Tonys stage for the first time.

On June 7, 2015, Garcia got to perform on the 69th annual Tony Awards, the same show that her father showed her 22 years before, this time, dancing with the company of Gigi.

Her God-sister Lamae Caparas was also performing on the Tonys, in the company of The King and I.

Just 2 months after the 69th Tony Awards, there was a casting call for Hamilton and they were looking for a female swing. The show had just opened on Broadway in the Richard Rogers Theater.

In musical theater, a swing is an ensemble member who plays one or more roles in the show. These roles are often referred to as tracks. In Hamilton there are 5 female tracks, and if she got cast in the show, Garcia would learn all of them, and be ready to perform them at any time.

There were 5 women in the audition room, and Garcia kept asking herself How am I here? The casting agency that was casting Hamilton had also cast Wicked and The Addams Family, so she was definitely in their books.

Garcia still doesn't quite know how she got into the audition room for Hamilton because it was such a small number of dancers who were asked to that audition.

I am so grateful for getting into that room, she says, her excitement visible.

After putting them through their paces, the casting directors announced that the 5 girls in the room were on the short-list for Hamilton and that they would all be in the show at one point or another.

And you know when you hear that, and you wanna believe that, but you never really know, she says.

Now she was on their short-list, but she wasn't hired for the show at that point. Her friend, Kamille Upshaw, was chosen to be in the show.

In the next few months, Garcia saw the show twice, always admiring how great it was, but never thinking that she would be in it.

Then in January, she got a phone call from her agents saying, Hamilton wants to know if you are available to come in to sing because they need someone. Another swing.

The opportunity was here, but she had already booked another gig as Consuela in West Side Story at Carnegie Hall.

Garcia wanted to know how many dancers had been called in for the audition.

She was the only one.

When she got to the audition, they wanted to hear her sing for the music director, Alex Lacamoire. He taught her some harmonies from The Room Where It Happens and had her sing the end of Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down) to see how high she could belt.

Finally, Lacamoire said, Well why don't you wait outside and I'll talk to Beth, and we'll see if Beth still needs to talk to you. Beth was the casting agent.

After waiting outside the room, Beth came out and said to her, Okay so we're on board, you'll get the official offer tomorrow.

It was at this point, Garcia started to tear up.

It was that same feeling I had when something phenomenally new and exciting has happened, she says with a huge smile coming across her face.

Although it is just another gig and another job, something about this show is special to Garcia.

The caliber of this show and to be a part of history. That's how my life changed.

Just after she was cast in the show, the creator and star, Lin Manuel Miranda, introduced Karla to the world in a special video, and he said and our first Filipina cast member, Karla Garcia, who has just joined our company.

He literally just threw that sentence away like it was casual, she explains. But from then on, it's like everyone would say The first Filipina cast member! And I'm so grateful for him to recognize that, she says, her eyes bright with pride.

Now, it's been almost 11 years since she first started on Broadway, and the journey has come full circle. She started in a show that turned out to be a flop, and now she's dancing in the show with the hottest ticket on Broadway.

For me if I just focus on the passion I've gone through a lot of rejection and a lot of ups and downs in terms of my career, but I've always been pretty happy, Garcia says. Even when it comes to not making enough money, or anything like that. I've

never put that out there into the universe, so I feel like that my outlook on life, has just helped me get to where I want to be.

Throughout her career, shes been building her choreographic voice, and after she takes her final bow on the stage, her choreography will take center stage.

For now, Garcia is enjoying her time on the stage, and living her dream that started at The Kennedy Center, and a positive attitude that never seems to fade from the face of the first Filipina in the cast of Hamilton.

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