

Happy-go-lucky Tania

As luck would have it, Indonesian Tania Gunadi ended up as a resident of Tinseltown.

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TANIA Gunadi seems to be born under a lucky star. Somehow, the 25-year-old Indonesian lead star of the Disney TV series *Aaron Stone* managed to do the right things at the right time to end up being an actress in Hollywood.

Her first stroke of luck happened when she was 16: Her father had won an American green card lottery, which enabled her to move from Indonesia to the United States to join her brother and sister there – it was the first time that she was out of the country.

But Tania could not speak English. Her brother, who worked as a manager in a Pizza Hut outlet then, roped her in to be a telephone operator at the joint so that she could learn the language. The task turned out to be more challenging than she had expected as she had no idea what the customers were saying!

"I was a telephone operator for the first two weeks ... then slowly but surely I was demoted to being a cook and later to cleaning the dishes and then the toilets," she says in an exclusive interview with *The Star* recently via a telephone call from Toronto, Canada, where the second season of *Aaron Stone* is being filmed.

In the popular action-adventure series revolving around teenage gamer/secret crime fighter Charlie Landers/Aaron Stone (played by Kelly Blatz), Tania is Emma Lau, the neighbour and schoolmate fancied by Charlie.

But in time, Tania managed to master the language and was "promoted" back to be a telephone operator.

Now, she speaks flawless American-accented English, though she reckons that her accent isn't perfectly American yet, which is why she goes to an accent coach once a month to "keep it sharp". "It's a journey, man!" she says.

Her second stroke of luck was when she landed a part in a Disneyland commercial. A friend at the pizza joint had invited her to audition for the role. She decided to give it a shot since the role only required her to scream.

Tania was picked to join a cast of 16 but on the day of filming, due to the numerous times the actors had to sit in a rollercoaster, many ended up sick!

"All the leads got sick after being on the rollercoaster for 17 times but I was the only girl who was so excited because I'd never been to Disneyland and I was like, 'Oh my God, this is so awesome!'" she recalls with amusement.

Next thing she knew, the director invited her to be the lead in the commercial.

"I said to myself: 'Hey, I guess I found my career. I don't have to work hard, it's all fun and I get a big, awesome paycheck,'" she says with a laugh.

She was so proud of her achievement in the commercial that she thought that she could just attend auditions and land a job despite not having taken any acting classes. Instead, she couldn't book a job for six months, and her family started to get worried for the aspiring actress.

It then dawned on her that if she was serious about an acting career she should learn more about the profession. So, she began to take lessons.

"Growing up I was never exposed to art or acting classes. I didn't know what it meant to be an actor," she admits.

Tania's drive and effort paid off. She began landing roles in TV shows. (According to the



(From left) Aaron Stone, Dark Tamara and his cyborg sidekick S.T.A.N. – played by Kelly Blatz, Tania Gunadi and J.P. Manoux – in yet another dangerous mission on *Aaron Stone*. – Photos courtesy of Disney Channel

»I can't help but smile every morning because I'm truly living my dream right now«

TANIA GUNADI

movie website IMDb, her first role was in a 2001 movie called *A Real Job*.) Initially the roles were minor but in time they grew meatier.

In 2003, she was signed up for a recurring role in TV drama *Boston Public*. In 2005, she acted opposite Skeet Ulrich in the TV movie *The Magic of Ordinary Days*. But her major break came in *Aaron Stone*, where she was cast as the lead actress. The show started airing this year (in May on Malaysian TV). Tania's Emma Lau is also Dark Tamara, a weapons specialist who's Emma's persona in the video game *Hero Rising* aced by Charlie (Aaron Stone is his avatar).

Says Tania: "Emma is the girl next door who loves to play the drums and video games, and tease Charlie; she's just like a normal teenager. Dark Tamara is a stronger version of Emma and very business-like. She is busy inventing new weapons and gadgets, and helping Aaron Stone save the world."

Tania's parents were rather shocked that she ended up becoming an actress.

"None of them have been exposed to the acting world, so they used to think that it was an 8-to-5 job!" she says. "Right now, they're very, very happy because they get to see



Tania plays drummer chick Emma Lau who, like her neighbour Charlie Landers, is adept at playing the video game *Hero Rising*.

Aaron Stone every Friday (in Indonesia)."

Performing, unsurprisingly, is in her blood. Her mother is a ballroom dance teacher and her father, who loves to sing, works in a karaoke place.

"He sings more than the customers!" she says, laughing.

Tania now visits Indonesia once a year and says that her parents have no plans to join her in the United States.

"I love to eat, you can ask anyone on set ... Every time I go back to Indonesia, I eat, like, everything," she says, adding that her favourite food is *mee goreng* (fried noodles).

Feeling completely at home in America, Tania lives with her two cats in Los Angeles, a city she describes as "amazing". Although her first year there was tough – she had to learn how to communicate, cook, and get over her fear of ghosts to live alone – she has come to regard the city as her "hometown".

The city is clean, the people are nice, and there are just so many opportunities, she says. "And I can take so many different classes," she enthuses.

To date she has taken drumming and guitar lessons as well as classes in karate, kick-boxing, swimming, acting, voice-over, and hip-hop.

On the set of *Aaron Stone*, Disney even hooks her up with martial arts trainers to prepare the stars for the action scenes.

For now, Tania will be in Toronto until the end of September, filming with the cast and crew who have become like family to her.

"(But the cast and crew) don't have much time to hang out because we film 14 hours a day, and you go off to have eight hours' sleep," she says.

But she doesn't mind the rigours of her job. Like many kids and teenagers around the world, Tania has always dreamt of being part of a Disney show. And she finds filming in Toronto fun, too.

"It's really nice as long as you're not here in the winter as it can be super, super, super cold and you can't really talk when you're filming!"

She shares many scenes with the 22-year-old Blatz, and enjoys doing the fight scenes with him.

"I'm comfortable with him because he remembers his moves, so I know he's not going to throw me over the table or hit me with metal," she says, adding that she thinks Aaron Stone is "awesome and good-looking".

Tania says happily: "Every day I wake up and I know that the driver is going to take me to the set to work on *Aaron Stone*. I can't help but smile every morning because I'm truly living my dream right now."

■ *'Aaron Stone'* airs on Disney Channel (Astro Channel 615) every Friday at 6.30pm.