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LIFE+STYLE LEAD STORY

Living Dream

By Arnold Wayne Jones Staff Writer

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The irony between the plot of “Dreamgirls” and the success of the production is not lost on Sheryl Lee Ralph. In the original run of the Broadway musical, loosely based on the story of the Supremes, Ralph played Deena Jones, the Diana Ross character — beautiful and charismatic — who displaced the less attractive Effie White (Jennifer Holliday, playing the Florence Ballard character) as lead singer of the group.

On stage, Deena basked in the warmth of the footlights while Effie’s star faded. In real life, Holliday beat out Ralph for the Tony Award. But while Ralph might have walked away empty-handed on Tony night, it didn’t bother her one bit.

“It’s so funny you mention ‘Dreamgirls’ — I just hung up the phone talking to Jennifer,” Lee says from her office in Los Angeles. “I think some relationships will never be broken. As far as I’m concerned, I will never, ever forget what it was like to stand in the wings and hear one of the greatest singers ever perform in front of people who had never heard her before. The ferocity of it would just nail you to the wall every night.”

But her time starring in “Dreamgirls” holds bittersweet memories for the actress.

“That was the best and worst of all times for me,” she says. “That year, 1981, men were being diagnosed with a new disease known then as the gay men’s cancer. It eventually got to the point where I could not cross one more name out of my phonebook. It was death without dignity, death without love and without support usually. It was a terrible time, a judgmental time of hostility.”

Some of Ralph’s friends and collaborators from “Dreamgirls” — including director, Michael Bennett, choreographer Michael Peters and author Tom Egan — eventually succumbed to the disease, a fact that she says devastated the theatrical community in ways that are still apparent.

“I know AIDS transformed the theater scene in that we have very few originals now — all of the originators are dead,” she says. “They are just not making good, new theater at the rate they once did.”

That revelation led Ralph to form Divas Simply Singing, an annual California-based AIDS fundraiser, more than 15 years ago. It also brought her together with the National Minority AIDS Council, for whom she serves as national spokesperson.

This weekend, Ralph brings her one-woman show “Sometimes I Cry: The Loves, Lives and Losses of Women Infected and Affected by HIV/AIDS” to the NMAC leadership summit on HIV in Dallas.

“The show came about from my remembering those times when men were sick today and dead tomorrow,” she says.

“Sometimes I Cry” is part performance, part reminiscent, part plea and part safe-place where people can ask questions about the disease. She came up with the idea for the show about three years ago.

“When you take on being a spokesperson, you need to know what you’re talking about,” she says. “When I realized in the summer of 2003 that the HIV infection rate among women began to equal that of men, that scared me.”

She first performed “Sometimes I Cry” last December, with the intent to show it in any small spaces — conventions, coffee shops — that would want to hear her. But soon, theaters started to call.

“It’s been the most amazing ride,” she says. “I had no idea I would catch on. Nobody wants to hear about AIDS anymore. But since there are over 10 million AIDS orphans in the world, somebody needs to hear about it. There’s a line in the show: ‘Your silence will not cure you, your silence will not heal you. Do not let your denial be deeper than your grave.’ That’s really why I do the piece.”

Ralph has continued to perform in a variety of media — more Broadway (“Thoroughly Modern Millie”), film (“The Mighty Quinn,” “The Distinguished Gentleman,” “To Sleep with Anger”) and television (recurring roles on “ER,” “Mo’Nisha” and “Designing Women”



DIVA IN DALLAS: Sheryl Lee Ralph performs “Sometimes I Cry: The Loves, Lives and Losses of Women Infected and Affected by HIV/AIDS” at the Hilton Anatole on Sunday.

among them), but she's loath to pick a favorite.

"Every project is terrific in its own way," she says, before acknowledging that live theater holds a particular place in her heart. "Unless you know how to handle an audience for real and know how to have them in the palm of your hand, you're not a performer," she continues.

In a perfect world, she says, "Sometimes I Cry" would be seen by Elton John, who would insist on writing connecting music for it and putting it on Broadway. But until then, Ralph is happy to spread the word one audience at a time.

"We can't stop thinking about AIDS and the agenda can't change — because the agenda is humanity," Ralph says. "AIDS is going to be here another 25 years if we don't wake up."

"Sometimes I Cry: The Loves, Lives and Losses of Women Infected and Affected by HIV/AIDS." Hilton Anatole Hotel, 2201 Stemmons Freeway. June 4 at 7 p.m. The HIV Prevention Leadership Summit continues through June 7.

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