



Refocusing Her Spotlight

By Life+Culture
By Paul E. Pratt

While penning her new one-woman stage show, *Sometimes I Cry*, actor and singer Sheryl Lee Ralph turned to a book of tips for writing a hit production. Included was a section on words to avoid: "One of the words was African," recalls the actress. "They said don't use black, shy away from woman, and HIV/AIDS is the kiss of death."

Ralph immediately knew she'd be scrapping those suggestions.

"I'm definitely of African descent," says Ralph, who appears regularly on the Showtime sitcom *Barbershop* and starred on the TV series *Moesha*. "I'm definitely a woman—one of those curved-type women, so there's no mistaking me. And I'm passionately committed to erasing the stigma and raising awareness of HIV and AIDS."

Ralph's efforts to spotlight the impact of AIDS among women couldn't come at a better time. At the beginning of the AIDS pandemic 25 years ago, the disease was primarily affecting white gay men; in 1985 only 8% of newly diagnosed U.S. AIDS cases among people 13 and older were among women. But by 2004 that percentage had more than tripled to 27%. African-American women, who make up 13% of U.S. females, now account for over two thirds of new AIDS cases among women 13 and older.

Those numbers aren't lost on Ralph, who says her commitment to fighting the disease is as strong as—or stronger than—it was in the early 1980s, when she rocketed to stardom in the Broadway production *Dreamgirls*.

"For me, that was the best and worst of times," she recalls. "The worst of times was seeing friends up and down Broadway dropping dead from this mystery illness. It's hard for people to remember now, but at that time to be diagnosed with this disease was a death sentence. You were sick today, dead tomorrow."

Tired of losing friends to AIDS, Ralph in 1990 founded the Diva Foundation, a charitable group that uses music and entertainment for HIV education, including the annual 'Divas Simply Singing!' concert. She's also on the board of trustees and board of directors, respectively, for the Los Angeles AIDS groups Project Angel Food and the Black AIDS Institute, and she is a frequent speaker for the National Minority AIDS Council.

But now Ralph has found a more personal way to use her art to fight the disease—through her very intimate one-woman show.

Sometimes I Cry chronicles "the loves, lives, and losses" of women infected with and affected by HIV through a series of short monologues, Ralph says. During each one-hour-plus stage performance, she becomes a host of characters, from an 18-year-old girl trapped in the foster care system to a 68-year-old grandmother and Sunday school teacher. Just as the real-life women struggling with the disease are all different, so are the characters in her performance, Ralph notes.

The show kicked off in Santa Monica, Calif., in March, and it has also been staged in Arizona, Georgia, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. Ralph says so far the show has been extremely well-received, something she hopes will pave the way for a long run and numerous opportunities to educate her audiences.

“All the people who need to hear and know these messages—that’s who I hope it lands in front of,” Ralph says of her show. “It will always be a work in progress as long as there are health rights to be discussed, women’s rights to debate, women’s health to be talked about, and HIV has not been cured.”