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'Dreamgirls' Broadway lead offers one-woman show

'Sometimes I Cry' focuses on HIV/AIDS epidemic

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Sheryl Lee Ralph is cold. "Freezing," she says, her actressy accent on the last syllable.

Ralph is one of those actresses who works tirelessly, still you may not recognize the name without the résumé:

She was a regular in "Designing Women." She's been in movies with Denzel Washington and Whoopi Goldberg. Most recently she had a two-episode guest shot on "ER."

But her stop in sub-zero Milwaukee has its roots in "Dreamgirls." Before Beyoncé ever heard of Deena Jones, Ralph earned a Tony nomination playing the lead "Dreamgirl" in the 1980s Broadway musical. That stint inspired "Sometimes I Cry," a show about AIDS and HIV.

While Ralph was performing on Broadway, she said, men on that same street were dying of a mysterious illness that turned out to be AIDS and HIV. Decades later, the victims have a different face.

"Black women, women of color, represent the fastest-growing group of those with the disease," Ralph said. "So I went about the business of sitting down and writing down these women's stories and performing them. I liken it to we're a distant cousin of 'The Vagina Monologues.' "

In this show, Ralph has all the roles. She also has all the control.

"Know what? I'm never in disagreement with the director. I never have to argue with the cast about showing up. It always works."

"Sometimes I Cry" has been her focus, but Ralph made time to catch the movie version of the show that launched her career.

"I thought it was a good movie. I didn't think it was a great movie," she said. "I enjoyed it."

Ralph's been on the road for a year with "Sometimes I Cry," but she thinks it might be time for a return to Los Angeles - and not just because it's warm there.

"I'll probably do it (the show) for a long time. It remains relevant, you know," Ralph said. "I think, though, I'd like to do some TV. It's pilot season, so I'm up for a whole lot."

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