

Sheryl Lee Ralph performs 'Sometimes I Cry'

Pure compassion

By Jonathan Gramling

You would know Sheryl Lee Ralph by sight, even if you didn't know her name. Ralph, one of the original Broadway "Dreamgirls," has appeared in numerous films and television shows. She was Moesha's step-mom in "Moesha" and Anthony's wife in "Designing Women."



She was also Florence Wilson in "Sister Act 2." Ralph has been on just about every TV show and performing arts venue possible. And she even found time to establish Divas Simply Singing, an annual Hollywood fundraiser for AIDS prevention causes.

There are many career building and lucrative roles that Ralph could be doing with her time right now. But she has chosen to lead with her heart and her passion by writing, directing and acting in the one-woman theater show 'Sometimes I Cry,' a show that tells the stories of women affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Ralph is on a tear right now. She had already performed in nine cities in ten days and she wasn't scheduled to get back home for another eight days by the time she performed at Mt. Zion Baptist Church March 10, in a performance sponsored by The African American Health Network. Sometimes was one of the most effective -- if not the most effective -- informative presentations about HIV/AIDS this reporter had ever witnessed.

"I say it is a distant cousin to the 'Vagina Monologues' in that it is women's stories that we tell around HIV and AIDS," Ralph said in an interview with The Capital City Hues. "Somebody said it was a 'Great piece of Sex Theater,' but we are much more than that. Of course it has to do with sex because it is about HIV and AIDS. And we are upfront in talking about the fact that it is a sexually transmitted disease. And we have to get real about that. But the show is much more than that."

The show gets into the skin of these women, portraying the complexity of their lives and the oftentimes tragic reasons they contracted HIV. "When I first started hearing these women's stories, there was always something at the root of it: poverty, lack of education, lack of access to health care, ignorance, issues of self-esteem, violence, and mental illness," Ralph said. "Sometimes it seemed like AIDS and HIV were just a bi-product of it all."

Ralph's passion about the HIV/AIDS cause began 25 years ago when the AIDS pandemic was just getting started and no one knew what caused it. "And when guys just started dropping dead, that was an ugly time in America," Ralph recalled. "I just saw how terrible people could be to each other and the deadly silence that surrounds their death." One third of the original company that put on Dreamgirls would eventually die from AIDS, including choreographer and director Michael Bennett.

Ralph began to see that history was starting to repeat itself as the HIV/AIDS pandemic started to make deep inroads into another population. "Now, 25 years later with all of the hoopla that's going around 'Dreamgirls,' the movie, there's that same silence around HIV/AIDS now," Ralph said. "But now it's around women,

especially women of 'color and children with this disease, and nobody is saying anything, just like back in the 1980s. I just got so fed up. 'What's the big deal? What's the hurry?' Once again, I see that same thing about 'those people.' It wasn't right then and it isn't right now. It certainly isn't right now because once women have a problem with it, that's everybody. Everybody has a problem then because when momma doesn't feel good, no one feels good. It's really going to hurt people when they have to start burying their children. That's why I'm involved."

While Ralph has committed herself to this project, it isn't easy even if she has star power. Sometimes she feels she is hanging out there on her own. One woman, after finding out Ralph didn't have the disease, couldn't understand why she was involved. Others have felt she should be doing something else. "I've had people say things to me like 'Nobody cares about that AIDS,'" Ralph recalled. "'Why are you always doing this charity work? Do something to make some money.' It's really a battle. Every now and then, a child will stand up and say 'Ms. Ralph, I get it.' I just hope. I don't want it to be my daughter. I don't want it to be my son. I don't want that for them. I say to people all the time 'I don't know how not to be the change I want to see.' You have to live by example sometimes. Sometimes, it's just hard. And people want to throw 'You should be doing this and you should be doing that' out at me. I think we all should be about the business of caring. That's me. But it sure is hard."

And she hasn't been able to get corporate backing to perform Sometimes where it matters most: in communities with high rates of infection. "There were three universities I wanted to go to in Atlanta," Ralph said. "And of course, these big corporations have people who go out and test the field. They came back and said 'Ms. Ralph, I don't think we can mobilize the students around that subject.' We're talking about three of the most active and advanced colleges for Black youth and you're going to tell me you can't mobilize them? I was scared and I wanted to say 'Then we need to be about the business of mobilizing them. We need to make sure we do everything to make sure they come out and experience this.' But folks don't want to work that hard."

Yet, Ralph has made some headway. Due to the pastors' support and commitment, Ralph performed Sometimes before 7,000 people at Enon Tabernacle Baptist Church in California and 1,000 got tested. In Georgia, she performed Sometimes before 3,000 people.

When she does get discouraged in fighting with this one-woman show, Ralph relies on her spirituality. "God knows what He is doing," Ralph emphasized. "I just feel we have to be proactive about this I don't think He would want us to sit back and let this be our plight and our fate. It certainly isn't the hope and dream of the slaves. I don't believe it." While sometimes she may cry and feel the fatigue, Ralph will continue to battle on against this deadly disease.

For more information about Sheryl Lee Ralph and 'Sometimes I Cry,' visit www.sometimesicry.org.