

Sheryl Lee Ralph - Wednesday's Woman

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Sheryl Lee Ralph, is a thoroughly modern mom

It was Whoopi Goldberg who got Sheryl Lee Ralph back to Broadway. As a guest on 'Hollywood Squares' a few months ago, Goldberg asked the actress what it would take for her to star in a new role on Broadway.

She told Goldberg, "It would have to be a great part." As it happens, Goldberg was one of the producers of 'Thoroughly Modern Millie,' the 2002 Tony winner for best musical. She knew the role of Muzzy Van Hossmere was perfect for Ralph.

Soon the actress was back in New York in front of a live audience eight times a week. "I love TV but you can't beat the immediate feedback that you get from a Broadway audience."

Sitting in the dressing room of a New York City TV studio surrounded by pots of powder, lipstick tubes and carelessly discarded mascara wands, Ralph is dressed in a bright green shirt and pant set.

She's just taped a cooking segment for the syndicated lifestyle show, B. Smith with Style. During a quick interview she talks about her Broadway role and upcoming projects with the enthusiasm and energy of an ingenue even though she has been an entertainer and on our collective radar screens for over twenty years.

Open and warm, it's not hard to see why Sheryl Lee Ralph is, without a doubt, one of the busiest and most consistently employed actors in Hollywood. She has a striking face and a "Who's that?" voice that is husky, sexy and commanding.

Since first taking our breath away as Deena Jones in the uber-popular Broadway show, Dreamgirls, Ralph has worked non-stop. And she has no desire or plans to slow down. In November for the fourth year in row, she will be hosting the upcoming 'Jamerican Film Festival' in Montego Bay, Jamaica.

In October, for the twelfth consecutive year, she has organized and will headline 'Divas: Simply Singing,' a fundraiser for Project Angel Food and Caring For Babies with AIDS.

"I love the film festival because it allows so many up and coming filmmakers to showcase their work," says Ralph who also acts as the festival's director.

"It's a networking opportunity for producers, writers, actors and directors who wouldn't normally have a chance to meet each other. And, hey, you can't beat the location. Jamaica is beautiful."

She's a "Jamerican" herself (Jamerican is slang for someone whose parentage or upbringing was split between Jamaica and America), growing up between Long Island, New York and Jamaica, where she was born. It's not surprising then that the singer and actress is passionate about the island and the festival.

It was also passion that motivated her to create 'Divas: Simply Singing.' Ralph is informed about AIDS and wants others to get up to speed. "AIDS is now a heterosexual disease that affects millions of people around the globe."

By producing and performing in the showcase, she's found a way to help fight the disease. Divas: Simply Singing allows Ralph and the sister singers and actors she recruits each year, to not only dazzle an audience but to raise thousands of dollars for both organizations.

Singers Roberta Flack and Diana King and actresses Elizabeth Berkley and Victoria Rowell are just some of the boldface names that will be entertaining this year. Past performers have included Sharon Stone, Rita Moreno, Eartha Kitt, Chaka Khan and Goldberg.

Personally, Ralph is divorced after nine years of marriage but tells B. Smith “I’m dating a vegetarian,” during the show taping. Her new love is Pennsylvania State Senator, Vincent Hughes.

But it is Ralph’s children, son, Etiénne ,10, and daughter Ivy-Victoria , 7, who are most tightly woven into the tapestry of her hectic life. “They’re bi-coastal kids, comfortable in New York and California. I’m so happy about that,” she offers.

Juggling parenting, performing and dating are seemingly effortless for the beaming Ralph. No wonder her wide, bright brown eyes look as if they’re always asking, “What else have you got?”