

'Diva' Sheryl Lee Ralph Returns To B'way

Critics say Beyonce is the diva of the year, but they've yet to witness this dynamite woman in action! Sheryl Lee Ralph returns to Broadway on March 1 when she'll be hosting *Black 2: Broadway - Divas Simply Singing!*, a fundraising event celebrating the contributions of performers of color in the arts. Proceeds will benefit a cause close to Ralph's heart: AIDS cares charities.

After beginning the production of *Divas Simply Singing!* thirteen years ago, Ralph and the event are still going strong. "I had just lost so many friends to HIV/AIDS. It was just astounding to me that it's sort of hard for people to think that just twenty years ago you couldn't talk about AIDS out loud. For me at the time it was so difficult to see that people wanted to push the memory of my friends underneath like they didn't matter, like they weren't contributing members of society. So I started the event," Ralph remembers.

The event sets the stage for Black History Month as it features divas from all walks of life. "We've had all kinds of divas, young divas, mature divas, big divas, small divas, all divas nonetheless," exclaims Ralph. "We've had so many Divas do the show. Women like Tisha Campbell who have donated their time year after year through pregnancy and everything to be there for the show. Nancy Wilson, Rita Moreno, Melissa Manchester, Wild Orchid, Angie Stone, Stephanie Mills, Leslie Uggams. *Divas Simply Singing!* is actually about caring women with experiences who have put their voice literally and figuratively right on the stamp of this war, and are out there talking and doing what they do best, singing, raising their voices, and bringing their attention to something that cannot be swept under the rug."

This year's line up is no exception. Featuring a wide range of talent from Ebony Jo-ann, to BJ Crosby to American Idol 2004's Kira (best known for her jabs at



Sheryl Lee Ralph

Simon) to 5 year-old spoken-word artist Autum, *Divas Simply Singing!* is anything but lacking in the entertainment department.

"BJ is so wildly talented, talk about a butt-kickin' blues singer. That woman has a voice that could blow the roof off of a house," Ralph reveals with excitement. "I always believed in having a little diva. I started out young and on the stage, and I always loved that moment in the light, so we always try to find some young talented little girl that has a voice or spirit or something, so we've got a five year-old spoken word artist named Autum. When they're that young they do not get the title of diva.

The title of 'diva' must be earned by many good works and temper tantrums. So she is a DIT - diva in training."

Ralph has certainly earned her diva title, being a stage and screen highlight for many years. Best known for her role as Deena Jones in the Broadway musical *Dreamgirls*, a role of which she originated and created, Ralph seems to be able to do everything and anything. After her Tony nominated performance in *Dreamgirls*, she went on to star in the television series "It's a Living," "New Attitude," "Designing Women," and "Moesha." Also a famous face at the multiplex, Ralph has appeared in *Sister Act II*, *The Flintstones*, *The Mighty Quinn*, and *To Sleep With Anger*, amongst others. In 2003, she graced the stage on Broadway once again as Muzzy Van

Hossmere in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. Most recently, Ralph has completed films *Deterrence* with Timothy Hutton, and *Personals* with Malik Yoba.

With her career constantly in motion, Ralph makes sure to devote much of her time to *Divas Simply Singing!* and all that it entails. "It's [HIV/AIDS] a problem for men, it is truly a problem for women. I have always said that, always felt that. When I look at the numbers, and see how the numbers are spiking on the high side once again, I say you know what Sheryl, now is not the time to shut up even though it's frustrating. You've got to keep on getting the word out there. And for me, I find that one of the best ways to do that is through entertainment. If you can get people to relax, sometimes they listen. If you get them to laugh, sometimes they understand better. That's how I look at it. We get to do that with *Divas*. So I'm excited to bring it even in a small way to Broadway."

In addition to planning a Broadway revival starring Ben Vereen, Wayne Brady, Sean Patrick Thomas, and of course Sheryl herself (tentatively coming to the stage in 2006 - mum's the word on which one!), Ralph is currently developing a new line of candles which will also benefit AIDS cares charities. "We're hoping that people will help us light the light of compassion, and wake people up so that they can actually see that we have an issue here, and that it must be dealt with."

As far as further collaborations between Ralph and her fellow entertainers are concerned, this diva maintains an assured position of hope. "It's difficult to sustain it, but until there is a cure, there will always be a need and a time for *DIVAS Simply Singing!*"

Donations to the AIDS cares charities can be sent to: Divas Foundation 5103c, 9000 Sunset Blvd., Suite 709, West Hollywood, CA 90069. Donations are tax deductible. For more information visit www.divassimplesinging.com.

■ - Iris Wiener