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DREAMY REUNION & A 33-YEAR HUG

Sylvie · Wednesday, July 13th, 2016

There are times in a life when a very public event touches sharply on the personal. Such was the situation for me when Broadway Under the Stars presented the *Dreamgirls* 35th Anniversary Celebration on Sunday at the Ford Theatre in Hollywood. It featured the three top original stars of that show: Sheryl Lee Ralph, Loretta Devine and Jennifer Holliday.

Normally, I wouldn't write about a one-nighter because it's gone by the time the report hits digital print. I decided to break this rule last week — a little too late. The event was sold out. Hard-wired sold out. I figured I blew it. Poor planning. I dialed the publicist anyway. No answer. I left no message, but he called back. This super-nice guy said he would "see what he could do…"

The reason I was even having this conversation with myself is because, when *Dreamgirls* opened at the now-long-gone Century City Shubert in the early 1980s, I was working at the theatre desk of the *Los Angeles Times* and my assignment was to interview Jennifer Holliday, the sensational newcomer who was the talk of Broadway then, with a voice that could not just crack glass, but tear down a Crystal Cathedral.

Holliday was a skittish, overweight, very young, very volatile gospel singer, emotionally unprepared for the volume of attention coming at her all at once. Her middle name was Difficult — a difficult interview and difficult to pin down. Partly it had to do with her arriving in town late in the week for the show's Los Angeles run, and partly I forget what. But what I do remember is that I had to have a story by Monday morning and Holliday could only be seen mid-afternoon on Sunday. Yes, it could be done if I was willing to see her, take a nap, hit the office at midnight and spend the next few hours writing it.

When I told my boss Dan Sullivan what I'd decided to do, I added, "It'll be good practice." He stared at me and asked, "Good practice for *what*?" Had me there. We laughed about it, but the plan worked, the story made it on time — and Dan was right. I've never had to keep such a schedule again.

Some history here: *Dreamgirls* (originally titled *One Night Only*) was conceived by bookwriter Tom Eyen and composer Henry Krieger as a project for the memorable Nell Carter. Her performance in a musical version of Eyen's *Dirtiest Show in Town* prompted them to think about creating a musical about back-up singers. They workshopped an early version of the idea for Joe Papp, with Carter, Sheryl Lee Ralph and Loretta Devine, but when Carter bailed in favor of TV's *Ryan's Hope*, they shelved the project.

A year later, it came to the attention of Michael Bennett. Carter was still unavailable and they replaced her with, you know, that 20-year-old gospel singer named Holliday. All did not go smoothly. She made demands, met and unmet, and after a couple of tries and fails, when she would leave the project then return to it, Bennett expanded her role enough so that Holliday came back and this time she stuck with it.

Renamed *Dreamgirls* by then, it opened on Broadway in December 1981 with Ralph as Deena Jones, Devine as Lorrell Robinson and Holliday as Effie White. It received 13 Tony nominations, and won six awards, including Best Musical.

The Tony for Best Leading Actress in a Musical went to Holliday. Her recording of "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going" became her signature song as well as the #1 single on the 1982 Billboard R&B charts. The cast recording (boiled down to individual songs) won two Grammys: Best Musical Album — and Best Vocal Performance for Holliday's "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going."

In the years between then and now, life was not always kind to Holliday who had a lot of growing up to do, struggling in the unrelenting glare of a surfeit of celebrity. So last Sunday's celebration was a chance to see her again, as a willowy adult now, with hard lessons learned. Basically, all I wanted was to give her a hug. That nice-guy publicist made it happen. He found a single ticket for me. It was 2pm; show was at eight. I was off and running.

Loretta Devine.

Hosted by Perez Hilton and staged by Iona Morris, the 35th Anniversary of *Dreamgirls* that evening was Vegas-flashy, with a fine band on stage, and interrupted here and there by patter, song and dance offered up by a smattering of celebrities (including Mary Wilson, Kenny Lattimore and Frenchie Davis) and a slew of back-up performers. Then the leading ladies were ushered in to provide some history and do their thing.

Sheryl Lee Ralph.

The elegant Sheryl Lee Ralph took the stage by Diva Right, flaunting a blazing array of shimmering costumes, a strong voice and a brazen sexiness; the well-named Loretta Devine, sweet and uncomplicated, lovingly warmed the audience with her warbling every chance she had. But Holliday seemed to deliberately avoid flash and take a voluntary back seat to the proceedings — as if too much limelight might cause her to burn up. Until it was her turn.

Jennifer Holliday.

Then, with the spotlight squarely on her and only her, it was watch out, world. There is no question why the name and the voice still carry such recognition, resonance and power. She anchored the evening. Think of the unforgettable Odetta; think of Holliday's gospel antecedent Mahalia Jackson. The audience sprang to its feet, a crowd unleashed, a whole population in thrall…

If this sounds like a bit of a love letter to Ms. Holliday, that is exactly what it was always meant to be. We did have the brief backstage reunion. The very gracious Holliday did not remember the

interview, but she did remember the dizzy time and the story — and I got to give her that hug.

Somehow, 33 years was not too long to wait.

Time to exhale.

Photos by Tony Dimaio. Courtesy of Chris Isaacson Presents.

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