



# Leslie Uggams

**Evokes Lena Horne  
in *Stormy Weather***

BY DEBORAH BEHRENS  
PHOTOGRAPHER: ERIC SCHWABEL

# Forget the elegant charm and Tony Award winning thespian image.

Leslie Uggams owns a centerstage laugh to rival her legendary headliner voice. Its lusty, full-throated, nothing held back sound instantly infuses any room she inhabits with high wattage opening night energy.

That circle of life exuberance is on full display during an afternoon photo shoot at Pasadena Playhouse. As she morphs into one proud *sista*, Uggams recounts the evening Lena Horne acknowledged her performance in Horne's 80th birthday tribute by the Society of Singers at Lincoln Center in 1997. "We all walked off stage together and Lena said, 'Girl, you sang your ass off!'" declares Uggams laughing. "And I thought, I've been validated! I have been *val-i-dated!* Don't talk to me! Don't say *nothing* to me!"

The fact that Uggams was born the same year Horne's signature song "Stormy Weather" became famous is only one in a series of synchronistic overlaps she has shared with the legendary star throughout her own storied six decade career. The latest is her starring role in the west coast premiere of a new musical about Horne's life named after the famous Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler tune.

Conceived and written by Sharleen Cooper Cohen with direction by Michael Bush, *Stormy Weather* traces Horne's career from the Cotton Club days to her triumphant return to Broadway in 1981. It showcases songs penned by Strayhorn, Porter, Arlen & Mercer and Rodgers & Hart, with musical direction by Linda

Twine and choreography by Randy Skinner. The musical marks a reunion for Uggams with both Pasadena Playhouse and its Artistic Director Sheldon Epps. The two have known each other since Epps enticed her back to Broadway in 1982 with *Blues in the Night*, which he conceived and directed. Twenty years later, he directed her again in the 2002 Playhouse production of *Blue* when Uggams briefly took over for Phylicia Rashad before embarking on its national tour.

"Leslie is a true singing actress," emphasizes Epps. "It's a rare combination. You don't usually find people who are absolutely first class actors and have *that* kind of instrument. Truly a great voice with tremendous range, timbre and texture. For me, that's what makes her so special and what makes her so spectacular specifically in musical theatre."

## ***A True Multi-Hyphenate***

Even in today's multi-hyphenate world, few can lay claim to the kind of career trajectory that Uggams has achieved. How many can say they opened for Louis Armstrong as a child star and 50 years later inspired Pulitzer Prize winning playwright August Wilson to craft his first lyric for your character in *King Hedley II*?

For Uggams the spotlight began at six playing Ethel Waters' daughter on the TV series *Beulah*. She sang or danced alongside Gregory and Maurice Hines on countless shows for the likes of Milton

Berle and Arthur Godfrey. Harlem's Apollo Theatre created special material for her as an opening act for Ella Fitzgerald and Armstrong after Uggams repeatedly won its kiddie talent contests. MGM Records signed the little girl with the big voice to a recording contract.

When Uggams was 10 she saw her first theatrical show, the historic 1953 production of *Porgy and Bess* at the Ziegfeld Theatre starring Leontyne Price as Bess, William Warfield as Porgy and Cab Calloway as Sportin' Life. Her aunt Eloise Uggams was an ensemble member in the renowned company that later embarked on a world tour.

"My eyes just lit up!" she exclaims. "First of all Gershwin music does something to me. I just get chills whatever the song is. Just to hear the first music that starts before the play even begins was like ahhhhh. Seeing and hearing those amazing people on the stage would stay with me all my life."

The experience helped fuel what would become a lifelong devotion to acting lessons, dance classes, musical comedy workshops, Juilliard labs and tutorials with Stella Adler. "What people don't realize is that from the time I was eight years old, I studied acting," Uggams explains. "It was all part of a goal that perhaps someday I'll get to do theatre."

By 15, her appearances on *Name That Tune* led Mitch Miller, then head of recordings for Columbia Records, to sign her to a recording contract. Two

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years later, Uggams became a national phenomenon when Miller made her a series regular on his new musical variety show *Sing Along With Mitch* that debuted in spring 1961.

She was among the first African Americans to appear weekly on prime time television and would go on to make history again a decade later for her portrayal of Kizzy in the ground breaking miniseries *Roots*. With sudden fame came high expectations.

"I could not do what Britney Spears and others do today. I had to watch my P's and Q's. My parents were strict with me so there was not going to be any kind of craziness. That's not how I was brought up. I carried the whole black race and that was heavy!" she laughs.

In 1969, CBS cancelled the Smothers Brothers to silence the duo's increasingly political content and gave Uggams her own musical variety show in their coveted 9:00 pm Sunday slot. The gesture was later revealed to be a political stopgap when the network cancelled the show a mere 10 weeks later to launch *The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour* against NBC's juggernaut *Bonanza*. Uggams was just 25.

The network had rescinded a recent Tony winner for a country singer. Uggams won the 1968 Best Actress in a Musical award for her Broadway debut in *Hallelujah Baby*, which had been originally written for Lena Horne by Arthur Laurents. The show featured music by Jule Styne with lyrics by Betty

Comden and Adolph Green. When Horne withdrew, the foursome came to Atlantic City to see Uggams perform.

"These white people came down to the Harlem Club to see my act!" she exclaimed. "These legends! I had done my first show *The Boyfriend* in Berkeley and they had heard how terrific it was. They liked what they saw and asked me to read for them. The producer David Merrick fell asleep."

With Horne's departure however, Merrick soon left and Uggams got the lead in her first Broadway show. "I was blessed to have that experience," she admits. "I'm working with Comden and Green and Jule Styne teaching me songs. Just rehearsing with them was an experience because they were three very different characters. It was as much learning as it was watching these fabulous, insane, brilliant and talented people!" she laughs.

Now some 40 years later, Uggams has become a Broadway fixture appearing in such shows as *On Golden Pond* with James Earl Jones, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, *King Hedley II* (Tony nomination), *Anything Goes*, *Jerry's Girls* and *Blues in the Night*. Off Broadway credits include *The First Breeze of Summer* and *The Old Settler*. Regionals include *Master Class*, *Call Me Madam*, *Play On* and *Stringbean*.

***The First Breeze of August Wilson*** Clad in a vivid purple dress with a colorful coat, Uggams easily looks more than a decade younger than her 65 years. She exudes both the self assuredness of

an entertainer who has literally grown up in the spotlight and the charming warmth of someone skilled in the art of connecting to an audience, be it one or a thousand.

Uggams had just closed in The Signature Theatre Company's production of the Negro Ensemble's *The First Breeze of Summer* directed by Ruben Santiago-Hudson after delivering what *New York Times* critic Ben Brantley praised as a "subtle, contradiction-embracing portrayal" and was still coming down off the personal high.

"It was an *extraordinary* cast," she emphasizes. "We couldn't wait to get to the theatre so we could just be together which translated on the stage. A lot of that had to do with Ruben. We really immersed ourselves in the characters, the dialogue, the atmosphere and the relationships. So people really thought they were watching a family.

"Before there was an August Wilson there was the Negro Ensemble. The interesting thing was that when I was doing *Hallelujah Baby*, my leading man was Robert Hooks who founded it and was just in the midst of putting it together. Eventually he left the show because he got involved in the Ensemble. I always wanted to be in one of those plays."

Many involved with *Summer Breeze* were Wilson veterans. According to Uggams, once an actor does a Wilson play, "you're family. Because it's not easy doing August. He has a rhythm in his writing and you have to know how to do

Lena Horne, Dionne Warwick and Leslie Uggams at the Bravo Awards; Photographer: Kenneth Men'ard

that. Not everyone can.” Nor do they have a lyric written just for them for a role that garnered a second Tony nomination.

“It wasn’t going to be a song,” she says of Wilson’s *King Hedley II* tune. “It was supposed to be like a humming thing for my character.” She hums to illustrate.

gorgeous! For my 18th birthday, I was taken to see her perform at the Waldorf-Astoria. It was the greatest birthday gift you could ever have.”

In 1965, Horne pinned Uggams as a member of the prestigious black Delta Sigma Theta Sorority during its national

idea the piece would ultimately lead her back to Pasadena Playhouse or that Epps had played a part in its early evolution more than 10 years earlier.

Playwright Cohen had called Epps in the late ‘90s to set up a lunch to discuss her ideas for writing the piece. Epps remembered reading Horne’s autobiography years before. On his way to meet Cohen, he stopped by a used bookstore around the corner from the Playhouse and found a battered paperback version he presented to her for good luck.

Cohen kept in touch with him as the project developed over the next decade with Epps initially seeing a 2000 workshop production in New York. Uggams agreed to tackle a 2004 reading which was performed on the same stage she would come to do *Summer Breeze* four years later.

“This reading was like doing a Broadway show. I was worn out going back to do *Millie* every night! At the end of the thing, people went wild. I mean *wild*! It was crazy. Everything was telling me this was something I had to do.”

Three years and two workshops later, Uggams starred in the show’s world premiere at the Prince Music Theater in Philadelphia in 2007. Her commitment to the play and interest in a Pasadena staging, coupled with a new round of script revisions finally convinced Epps to mount a Playhouse production.

“I think a challenge of doing a show like this, which we faced with the Ray Charles show as well, is that people have such strong memories of these iconic performers the persons on stage recreating them had better be dynamite in their own way,” he explains. “I knew Leslie would be up to that and would find a way to invoke Lena Horne rather than do an impression.” The final sign for Uggams came when she went to New York to catch a matinee of *110 in the Shade* starring Audra McDonald during *Stormy Weather*’s run.

“I was talking to Audra and she said, ‘I’m trying to get to Philadelphia. I heard about it.’ I said, you heard about it? ‘Yeah, girl!’ People were standing in line to get her autograph and they said, ‘We’re from Philly and we saw the show. We loved it! When are you bringing it to Broadway?’ I thought, hmmm, we’ve got something good here.” ■

**“There was Lena Horne in a white robe with this towel around her head. I got to say hello to her. I was like, oh my god, she’s in a robe and a towel and she’s gorgeous! For my 18th birthday, I was taken to see her perform at the Waldorf-Astoria. It was the greatest birthday gift you could ever have.”**

“Then each time we rehearsed, Marion McClinton the director and August said, we can’t just let her do that. So it became like a couple of lines. Then the next time he came in he said, ‘I wrote you a song!’ He was so excited and more proud of that than all the lines he had written. It morphed into something that was just simply wonderful.”

### **Life Alongside Lena**

Growing up in New York, Lena Horne was a “goddess” in Uggams’ childhood home. Her parents played Horne’s records, went to her movies and watched her television appearances. Uggam’s mother had also been a Cotton Club dancer.

It was her mother who introduced Uggams to Horne for the first time during an accidental encounter on the sidewalk when she was a young teen. The next time the two met, Horne was making one of her regular appearances on *Perry Como’s Kraft Music Hall*, which shot on the Brooklyn soundstage next door to *Sing Along With Mitch*. It’s an image Uggams says she’ll never forget.

“I remember going up the stairs and there she was in a white robe with this towel around her head standing with Lennie Hayton in the hallway. So I got to say hello to her again. I was like, oh my god, she’s in a robe and a towel and she’s

convention at the Coconut Grove in LA where Uggams was performing. It was there Horne met Uggams’ fiancé Graham Pratt, a white Australian exporter of woolens who would later become her manager. The progressive pairing echoed Horne’s daring interracial marriage to Hayton 18 years earlier.

Their paths would cross frequently over the years. Dionne Warwick, Lola Falana and Uggams presented Horne at the Pantages for a sickle cell anemia benefit. But it would be Horne’s triumphant 1981 return to Broadway in *Lena Horne: the Lady and Her Music* where Uggams witnessed a dramatic shift in the woman known for her coolly controlled performances that she would re-create in *Stormy Weather*.

“It was like, oh my god, Lena is singing, honey! She is singing! She was funny and she was talking to people, which she never did. Usually it was all about introducing the song she was going to sing and that was it. But now she’s telling you stories and stuff like that. It was just phenomenal. It was like, oh my god! A re-birth of Lena Horne.”

### **A Stormy Road to Pasadena**

When Uggams was asked to star in a workshop production of *Stormy Weather* near the end of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*’s Broadway run in 2004, she had no

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