



S. EPATHA MERKERSON: Bringing Back Little Sheba

By Deborah Behrens

S Epatha Merkerson is grateful to have a day job that supports her theatre habit.

The fact that its tenure recently made her the longest running African American character in television history is a perk she never anticipated. But then neither was becoming a potential *Jeopardy!* answer.

"I'm now a trivia question!" declares the down-to-earth, critically lauded theatre, television and film actress best known for playing Lt. Anita Van Buren on the crime drama juggernaut *Law & Order*. "I love the opportunities the show has afforded me, especially being able to stay in New York and do theatre."

Her 14-year stint on the series makes Merkerson both its senior cast member and de facto den mother to the streaming multitude of actors who annually pass through the various L&O franchise turnstiles—a phenomenon that led creator Dick Wolf at last summer's TV critics press tour in Pasadena to quip:

"If you go to the theatre and somebody does not have a *Law & Order* credit, they either just got off the bus or they're really bad."

Merkerson bursts out laughing when told about Wolf's remark. "That's not true! When you go to the theatre, it's really

rare if someone in the cast hasn't been on *Law & Order*. But I do know a couple of people who are decent who haven't been on!"

If Helen Mirren was this year's award diva, then Merkerson paved the way in 2006 by winning Emmy, Golden Globe, SAG, NAACP Image and Gracie Allen Awards for her role as Rachel "Nanny" Crosby in the HBO film *Lackawanna Blues*. At each successive ceremony, she famously lost her acceptance speech down her dress, shared her hot flashes onstage and thanked her divorce attorney.

"It was extraordinary," she confesses. "All that and a divorce, too! It was a wild year. As sweet and as bitter as it could get. You know what I mean? Which made it even more interesting.

"You do this so long you never think of that coming your way. And the lovely response from co-workers and peers. I will always remember how good people were to me. And genuinely cool."

Flexing Different Muscles

A Broadway veteran, Merkerson originated the role of Berniece in August Wilson's Pulitzer prize winning play *The Piano Lesson* garnering Tony, Drama Desk and Helen Hayes Award nominations in 1990 for Best Actress. She got the part without ever auditioning for Wilson or its famed director Lloyd Richards.

"This casting director Meg Simon talked me up," she explains. "I went into that experience with men I considered the most preeminent voices in the theatre without either of

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them knowing me at all. I had nine days to learn Berniece before we went to the Goodman Theatre. We were off and on the road with that play for three years. Working with August and Lloyd on that process with that particular cast was one of the highlights of my career.”

Off Broadway Merkerson has received Obie Awards for her work in Cheryl West’s *Birdie Blue* and “I’m Not Taken,” Lucille Lortel nominations for both *Birdie Blue* and Suzan-Lori Parks’ *Fucking A*, plus the Helen Hayes Award for *The Old Settler*. She has also appeared in *Tintypes*, *Three Ways Home* and *Lady Day at Emerson’s Bar & Grill*.

“Doing theatre on hiatus is a great way for me to work muscles that would atrophy if I was just on *Law & Order*,” she explains. “It’s a different way of working. Van Buren is pretty tried and true. We know who she is and she’s pretty consistent so it’s nice to be able to try something new.

“I loved working with Suzan-Lori and doing her play. That was a masterful piece of theatre. When I would come home at night I could definitely feel the time I’d put on stage. Physically you’re tested when you do her pieces. Your brain is tested. That kind of mental and physical workout for me is rare in television and film. So I look for opportunities that allow the use of my body and my mind to come into play in ways they never can for Anita.”

This June, Merkerson will get another such opportunity when she returns to the Los Angeles stage after a 17-year hiatus (last appearing for CTG at the Doolittle in *The Piano Lesson* in 1990) to co-star as Lola with Bruce Davison as Doc Delaney in the classic William Inge drama, *Come Back, Little Sheba* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre, to be directed by Michael Pressman. The two-time, Emmy-winning television, film and stage director brought the idea of reviving *Little Sheba* to Merkerson during an L&O episode he was helming in 2006.

“Michael literally just spoke to me about it last year,” she says. “Because no one’s done it since the Broadway production and it’s one of those plays not often revived, I guess that sort of ignited this interest.”

Come Back, Little Sheba was one of the first dramas to address such taboo topics as alcoholism, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, failed marriage and broken dreams. The actress most identified with Lola is Shirley Booth who became the first woman to win both the Tony and Academy Award for the same role. Booth was 52 in 1950 when she co-starred with fellow Tony-winner Sydney Blackmer in the play’s only

Broadway run and 54 while making the film opposite Burt Lancaster.

Coincidentally, Merkerson was born in 1952 and is exactly the same age Booth was as she tackles the part. “I would say Lola is diametrically opposed to the kind of person I am,” she admits. “So it’s going to be a real challenge to find this character. We haven’t even done that much conversation with it yet. At 54, I’ve met many people in my lifetime and certainly there are elements of Lola I’ve seen.

Elements of Lola

“She’s a woman who loves her man and who is sticking with him through his troubles as well. I have an understanding of that. So there are lots of things I know I can borrow from my own life—the need to be with someone, the need to have something to love—that’s where the little dog Sheba comes in. But I’m speculating now!”

Merkerson says she’s thrilled to be working with respected film, television and Broadway veteran Davison, an actor she has long admired who is best known for his Oscar nominated, Golden Globe and IFC award-winning 1991 performance in *Longtime Companion*.

“The day Michael told me he was going to ask him if he was interested, Bruce was on one of my favorite TV shows. I said, ‘Oh my god! I just saw him last night on *Battlestar Galactica!*’” She laughs. “I like those sorts of coincidences. I love his work. So I’m really quite excited that he’s playing Doc.”

When asked whether Davison’s casting means the play is going to be performed color-blind, Merkerson flatly states, “I don’t believe in that. I believe when you sit down you see the colors. We’re just going to be two actors. Now what that means in terms of how people see it and how we do the play will be added texture to the story, because we’re keeping it in the ‘50s. I don’t know what Michael’s other ideas are for casting but I think this will certainly raise the stakes.”

As for revisiting the 1950s after so recently reliving them as Nanny in *Lackawanna Blues*, Merkerson says the period offers a myriad of issues to explore.

“There was a sense in the ‘50s of this privacy that we so don’t pay attention to now,” she explains. “More than anything what fascinates me about this play from the perspective of 2007 is recreating a time where things happened behind closed doors and no one really spoke about them. You know what I’m saying? We don’t live in that world anymore.” ■

Come Back, Little Sheba

Opens June 24;
plays Tues.–Fri., 8 pm;
Sat. 2 & 8 pm; Sun., 2 & 7 pm;
ends July 15
Tickets: \$20-\$50
Previews: June 17-23, 8 pm
(\$20 & \$30)
Kirk Douglas Theatre
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www.CenterTheatreGroup.org