

A LIFETIME OF ACTING

It was 1965. I was in the first grade. The teachers always told me I had a great speaking voice. In class, I was always called upon to read aloud. From the time I appeared in my first school play “Jimmie and the Sleep Fairies” I was hooked.

Jimmie is a little boy who refuses to go to bed until he is visited by fairies that tell him, “Early to bed and early to rise makes a young boy healthy wealthy and wise.” Jimmie starts going to bed early and so did I because I wanted to be the same.

I wanted, needed to be a performer. I had the lead in every school play from grades one through five. Then something happened in the sixth grade. It was 1968.

I was 10 years old. My voice changed. Like many boys going through puberty, it cracked, but I started earlier than my friends. I was cast as Ebenezer Scrooge in the musical “A Christmas Carol.” My acting was fine, but the singing proved stressful.

I was a year behind my brother in school. It was bad enough to follow a straight “A” student but on top of that, his music teachers said he had “perfect pitch”. So here I am in this production giving my best British accent for the meanest Scrooge this side of the London breweries, but when it’s time for me to sing, my voice cracks. Mr. Brown, the director, finally replaces me two weeks before the show opens.

That was my first taste of the world of entertainment. I should have packed up and quit the business then, but I did not. I think I went home and cried. About a week later, Mr. Brown called saying he had replaced me with Anthony Avery, who was a brilliant singer, but couldn’t get his lines right. The director had come up with a perfect solution.

“Dale, did you see the movie My Fair Lady that came on television the other night?”

“Yes Mr. Brown, but what does that have to do with me?”

“It was a musical Dale and the star, Rex Harrison could not sing. Did you notice how he talked his way through the songs?”

“Dale, I think if you are willing to practice talking through your songs, like Rex Harrison, we could put you back in the play.”

It was like a dream come true. The sense of accomplishment of doing that play never left me. I felt I could do anything.

The next year when they were casting *No Man is an Island*, a non-musical based on the poem by John Donne, I knew I had the lead, hands down. I was on a streak. Mr. Brown cast my best friend, Bruce Melvin instead.

It was the reason I came to school. I was always staying after school to be apart of some production.

Romeo & Juliet

Debbie the Dreamer

Day of Absence

Message from Cougar

Live Spelled Backwards

The Legend of Sleepy Hollow

Godspell

To Sir with Love

The plays came at a blur. I just wanted to be on stage projecting my voice before audiences

This was in addition to being the morning announcer. Things kicked up a notch when I entered high school. Plays were now directed by an official drama teacher, not just an English teacher who runs a program after school. 9th grade I had the opportunity go to the district play festival with *Day of Absence*. 10th grade it was *Message from Cougar* and 11th grade it was *Live spelled Backwards*.



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1975 I moved to Baltimore and never lost the pace. I managed to convince my drama class to do *Day of Absence* for their regional play festival as well and got cast in the same role. I followed that production with the lead of Icabod Crane in the *Legend of Sleepy Hollow*.

I was a senior year at Baltimore's Northwestern High School in 1976 when I auditioned for my first musical since the sixth grade with *Godspell* and faced the same voice challenges all over again evoking memories of my sixth grade production of *A Christmas Carol*.

The drama department was headed by the fabulous Michael DeBoy. He cast me in the musical, *Godspell*, I had to learn the song *We Beseech thee hear us* for the role of Jeffrey in *Godspell*. I was a great actor and dancer, but my singing was not supreme. Mr. DeBoy replaced me halfway through production, but later called me back, just like Mr. Brown had done in the sixth grade with my role as Scrooge in "*A Christmas Carol*." He'd rather have an actor who couldn't sing than a singer who couldn't act. He made me join the gospel choir and take voice lessons. Though I was off tempo, at least my voice did not crack.

My final high school production was the senior class play called, *To Sir: with Love*. This was an unusual production because we had no real script. We basically watched the movie and wrote our own lines based on the film. I was cast as the

grumpy principal of the troubled high school. It all lead up to the moment the student sings the theme song, which happed to be our senior class song, Northwestern with Love, sung to the same melody.

My first play outside high school was in 1976 with the Arena Players. Formerly known as The Negro Little Theatre, Arena Players was formed in 1953 when acting opportunities for Africa-Americans were non-existent. The Baltimore jewel got a permanent home in 1969 and has become the country's oldest continuously operating African-American regional theater. I was cast as the lead in a one-act play called Shoes. This play was special for me because it was the first time in a real theater building, not just a stage in a school auditorium. I actually took a break off performing on stage for almost 3 years.

I discovered a musical theater studio on the campus of College of Notre Dame of Maryland in 1980. I auditioned and received a scholarship to The Cultural Arts Institute. The program was run by Debbie London, a wonderful lady who taught classes in dance, acting and singing. It felt like a mini-"Fame." Debbie London was my Debbie Allen, the inspiring dance teacher in that movie. I bought jazz shoes, leg warmers, colored tights, headbands and cut up a ton of sweatshirts. I purchased my first dance of a jock strap. My self confidence soared when the voice teacher chose me to sing "Isn't She Lovely" from *My Fair Lady* which brought back memories of my sixth grade



singing. It felt like a mini-"Fame." Debbie London inspiring dance teacher in shoes, leg warmers, colored up a ton of sweatshirts. I bought a much tighter version of a belt, a much tighter version of confidence soared when the sing "Isn't She Lovely" brought back memories of performance. Wouldn't my

sixth grade teacher Mr. Brown be proud of me actually singing a real song from *My Fair Lady* instead of just talking my way through it as I had done for him?

Our performances consisted of free concerts for senior citizen centers like the Waxter Center in Mt. Vernon and downtown plaza concerts at lunchtime for the chess and checker players. I was thrilled to be on a stage singing and dancing. It hardly mattered that my audience might be homeless people engaged in their own fantasies or seniors who could barely hear my off pitch singing.

Our graduation recital was a special program that took place on campus. The evening was perfect. I recited my favorite monologue from *Live Spelled Backwards*, performed my group dance and sang a duet from *Kiss Me Kate*.

From 1981-1986, I spent most of my creative time modeling and auditioning for movie, television and commercials. I joined the Screen Actor Guild in 1983 and did lots of extra work and training films. I started making money as an actor. I was cast in the original movie *Hairspray* that was shot on location in Baltimore.

1986 I rejoined the world of theater when I was asked to be a part of Family Circle Theater. This non-profit company was financed by The Baltimore Council on Adolescent Pregnancy and Pregnancy Prevention (BCAPPP). The performances were improv, but we were educated in many of the facts and figures on teen pregnancy rates, so we could introduce them in the various scenarios. I was paid about 30-50 dollars a performance.

Work became very steady for me because I started working for The Children's theater Association at the same time. I was cast as Cemal in *Tales of The Arabian Nights* and the Knave in *Knave of Hearts* when I was asked to create something special for Black history Month.

CTA (Children's Theater Association) asked me to create African folktales for Black History Month. After a few performances, I decided to incorporate and sub contract to CTA, retaining all rights to the stories and productions. I created a company called UMOJA SA!SA! (Ki-Swahili for "unity now") It allowed me the freedom to control my schedule, so I could audition for movies, film and commercials. *UMOJA SA!SA! Storytellers* took off.



I arranged photo shoots, designed our logo, created postcards, wrote PR releases and promoted. For a while, the arrangement with CTA worked well, but business

was trying to exert too much control, so we handled all our bookings after dissolving the partnership

John Hall and Vell Wheeler eventually joined our growing company. Vell was a gifted writer and a brilliant comedienne, while John sang, danced and packed a whole lot of energy, drive and enthusiasm. He had also studied drumming and created the most amazing voices. I was now sewing for a family of four. We looked fabulous!



We worked pretty steady. A pipe and drape kit was tied to the roof of my 1988 Sentra and African costumes was stored in the trunk. Umoja SaSa! Storytellers traveled to grade schools, colleges, and festivals and appeared on local talk shows during Black History Month. Due to Nzinga's tenacity, we had three or four bookings a week throughout the year. Our shows ran about 45 minutes and

included two or three traditional African folktales or stories about Black American slavery. We read tons of books filled with African and African American tales and adapted the stories to fit our stage presentations. Our interpretation of the Virginia Hamilton folktale "*The People Who Could Fly*" was one of our most popular presentations. The story ends when the slaves recite the secret African word (*Kumbaya*), then lift off to freedom while singing the hymn. We sang, danced, and provided the kids with Kiswahili study guides. Teachers were amazed!



Our repertoire varied and the characters were interchangeable. *Mr. Umoja and his Two Sons*, *The People Who Could Fly*, *The Most Beautiful Woman in the World*, and *Underground Railroad* are a few of our favorite stories.

We were invited to griot events, Kwanza festivals, and June Teenth celebrations. If African-Americans were celebrating the Black experience, Umoja SaSa! was there. In 1990, we were profiled in *Newsday*, a New York publication. Our props and sets grew, and so did problems transporting them. I actually pulled a hernia and had to take some time off.

Simultaneously, I was still working for Family Circle Theater and gaining so much skill as an actor from working with the director of that company.

That director of Family Circle Theater was the dynamic Kay Lawal. She rehearsed us on a weekly basis in various movements and improvisation styles.

She was the first director who pushed me beyond my limits. Kay told me that I had gotten by with a nice voice and a good face. She made me face the harsh realities that I was superficial as an actor. I never went deep because I did not have to. People liked the sound of my voice. I will never forget the exercise where she forced me to act with a group of actors without speaking. They could speak, but I could not. Kay showed me how to tap into my emotions as an actor.

She and I decided to start called it Actors Against

I went a step further and profit organization, which tax breaks. We did several guided us through the



our own company as well and Drugs.

secured 501© 3 status as a non-made us eligible for grants and shows for IRS who in turn lengthy cumbersome process.

The two theater companies kept us extremely busy from 1988 through 1991. We traveled to schools, churches, businesses, colleges, drug rehab treatment centers, and just about any place we could attract an audience.

Because of Nancy Regan's "Say no to Drugs" pitch, we got contracts with organizations like the USPS, Social Security Administration, and Baltimore City

Health Department. The Social Security contract, alone, covered over 300 performances. We also did a national broadcast on their satellite network.

AAD evolved with the times by addressing current health issues. We created an HIV piece since we were losing so many of our friends to AIDS. We immediately got another big contract with Johns Hopkins Hospital. The Baltimore City Health Department contract called for us to create a traveling show that dealt with HIV testing. After leaving Baltimore to work for QVC, I continued to work with AAD.

Our AIDS shows were even more powerful than our drug shows. Our prison shows were my favorite. I was especially turned on by our sexy captive audiences, because some of the hottest men can be found behind bars. Wortham Tinsley, our technical director, claimed he was worried about a breakout, but I later discovered he was more nervous about running into some of his former drug dealers. We were locked inside for two performances with a break in between shows, so we brought our own lunch. I loved being searched. In fact, I felt like the star of Baltimore's version of *OZ*. It was a neurotic/erotic kinky experience I shall never forget.

During 1991-1994 I left Baltimore to become a host on the QVC network. I returned from time to time to be a part of the companies I helped start.

My last gig with Kay was 1998 and it centered on domestic violence. The summer project was designed to teach kids how to tell their stories through rap, dance, poetry, and song. After I left Baltimore, Kay restructured the company with the help two other positive Black women. WombWork was the result of that collaboration. She continues to use theater to educate audiences on important social and health issues.

I had met Darryl Lemont Wharton in 1990 on another movie called *Homicide*. That movie was directed by David Mamet, another director who treated extras with respect, and took the time to get to know us. Darryl was a production assistant on

the film, although he had just finished college. Darryl was young, bright, brash, super talented, and eager to get people to read his screenplays.

Darryl wanted to diversify by writing and directing a one-man show. When I related the stories told by the drag queens I'd met he seemed intrigued. He thought the topic would make great theater. We explored the idea of drag as a mask to hide who is the true man under the make-up. He loved the name FREEda SLAVE. In the 90's everybody was a *DIVA*, thus *FREEda Slave: Mask of a DIVA* was born. We had a title, but we needed a script. Darryl quickly returned with a first draft. I was curious...and perplexed.

Darryl has a unique way of playing with words to make them mean two things at the same time. He wrote the story of Alfred, a cross dresser. Alfred's alter ego is



FREEda. The play starts at the close of a drag performance. FREEda enters her dressing room and breaks the 4th wall by talking to the audience as she undresses. We hear stories of Alfred/FREEda's life growing up. Some of the tales are funny and some are sad. As each tale is told, he removes a bit more of the mask. As each eyelash is removed, as the wig is taken off, as the bra is unhooked and the girdle is unstrapped, we learn the man behind the mask. At one point I am standing there naked reading a letter from that church sent me regarding homosexuality in the bible.

In 2000, Darryl and I took FREEda across the country to Los Angeles, there was no looking back. After a big farewell performance in the 14K Café at Maryland Art Place sponsored by Salem, we packed up his Sentra and drove non-stop to Los Angeles. *FREEda* opened at the Hudson Backstage Theater to small audiences at first. We got a great review and a Critic's pick of the week in the Backstage Dramalounge.

Luckily, one of my promotional cards wound up at Castle Rock Entertainment where a new pilot was being shot by Bruce Eric Kaplan, who would later create *Six Feet Under*. *Tinsel Tales* was pure fiction patterned after *E Hollywood True Story*. The producers called the theater looking for me. For my first audition in LA, I brought a clip of me in drag on *Homicide*. I won the role of a drag queen madam

who slept with famous celebrities and dished the dirt. “*I’ve seen them on their way up and seen them on their way down.*” was her famous line.

I got a call from a casting agent on my website. He suggested I go on an interview as a drag queen extra for a new Joel Schumacher movie starring Jim Carrey. The casting director explained that the film director wanted to hand pick the actor for the scene. Although I was at first insulted that I would have another “background” role I had to stop and remind myself, Schumacher had written *Sparkle*, *Car Wash*



agent who had seen *FREEda* suggested I go on an interview for a new Joel Schumacher movie. The casting director explained that he would hand pick the actor for the scene. I was first insulted that I would have another “background” role. I reminded myself, Schumacher had written *Sparkle* and *The Wiz*.

Joel loved my leopard ensemble. During my scene, I was surprised and delighted when he asked me to improvise with another actor who had a speaking role. Joel burst out laughing and said, “*I love what you’re doing!*” Suddenly I shot from drag queen background extra to day player. I wanted my character, *Lady of the Evening*, to be called *FREEda SLAVE*, but who argues with Joel Schumacher? (*I pray my scene in **the number 23** won’t end up on the cutting room floor.*) When I turned 48 the following week, I had a chain link tattooed across my arm with the words, *FREEda Slave*.

(post script; My scene ended up being cut)

After 25 years of trying to break into the business, I realized I was tired of trying. Even though I enjoyed *FREEda*, *QVC*, *AAD*, *Umoja Sa! Sa!* and some minor movie and TV roles, I really wanted to make a positive impact on people’s lives, not win Oscars. The Actors Studio suddenly seemed less important than the college classroom. I did not close the door completely, but I began to contemplate that there was another door to success, education.