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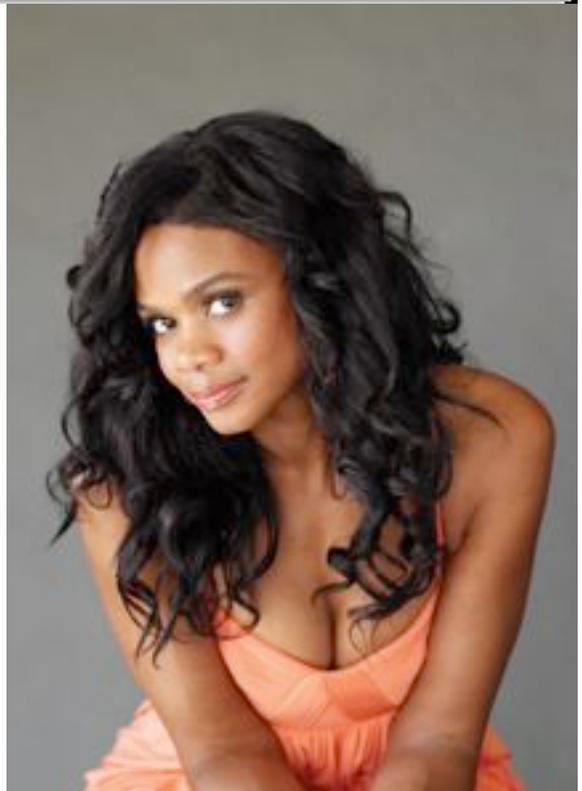
FEATURES

FOR EVERYONE: The Blood, Sweat, and Tears of Kimberly Elise

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"I found God in myself and I loved her, I loved her fiercely," wails Crystal, Kimberly Elise's tortured character in Tyler Perry's powerful new film "For Colored Girls", a sprawling look at the hardship and humanity experienced by eight women, each struggling with a different personal conflict that both effects and connects them in soul and spirit. The film, based on Ntozake Shange's 1975 Tony-nominated stage play "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Enuf," delivers a moving depiction of the female experience through poetic monologues and emotionally riveting performances from Ms. Elise as well as Loretta Divine, Phylicia Rashad, Thandie Newton, Anika Noni Rose, Kerry Washington, Tessa Thompson, Janet Jackson, and Whoopi Goldberg.

The journey of actor Kimberly Elise began when she left her hometown of Minneapolis after earning a BA in Communications at the University of Minnesota, got married, became a mother, and enrolled in the prestigious American Film Institute in Los Angeles. Not long after completing a rigorous course of study at AFI, Ms. Elise wound up robbing a bank...with Queen Latifah, Jada Pinkett-Smith, and Vivica A. Fox...in F. Gary Gray's *Set It Off*, her 1996 theatrical film debut. And then things really started to click. A critically-acclaimed performance in The Family Channel's Original Television Movie "The Ditchdigger's Daughters: A Black Family's Astonishing Success Story" (1997) led to a starring role in Jonathan Demme's *Beloved*, where she acted alongside Oprah Winfrey and Danny Glover. Stellar performances began to mount, paving the way to impressive turns in massive Hollywood productions including Nick Cassavetes' *John Q* (2002), playing opposite Denzel Washington and Robert Duvall; *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004), with Denzel Washington and Meryl Streep; and the Tyler Perry-penned and produced *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005). Her many television credits span from work on "The Sentinel" (1996) to a 2009 stint on "Grey's Anatomy." And now Kimberly Elise is back on the big screen with another astonishing, emotionally devastating, and ultimately inspiring performance in *For Colored Girls*.



Glowing with a beautifully enlightened awareness of life's deeper meanings, the sensitive and soulful artist met up with Venice at a bustling Toluca Lake eatery to enjoy a veggie burger and offer an illuminating conversation.

Venice Magazine: How did you find your way to Hollywood?

Kimberly Elise: I started out doing commercials and little industrial films in Minnesota, where I grew up. Then, I booked a national Wendy's commercial and used all of those earnings to pay my tuition to study Speech Communication at the University of Minnesota. After I graduated, I got married, had my first baby (Elise has two daughters: AjaBleu, 20, and Butterfly, 12) and got a job as a production assistant at a public television station. I started making short films and auditioning at local theaters. Being a young mother, it was all just a very magical and creative time in my life. I made a film that (director) Carl Franklin happened to see. He liked it and suggested that I apply to AFI. Miraculously, I got accepted! And then you came to Hollywood with a husband and a baby? Yes. The whole trip was an adventure, to say the least. We almost got killed in Colorado. We were robbed in Las Vegas.[*laughs*]

Did you ever doubt your decision at the time?

No. I always just knew that this is what I was supposed to do. It was just a matter of figuring out how to make it happen! There are no artists in my family. My parents are in education. I didn't have any mentors back then. For my first headshots, I just looked up photographers in the yellow pages.[*laughs*]

Do you remember the definitive moment when you knew that you were going to make a living as an actor and that there was no going back?

It was when I made it through AFI. The program was so demanding and so challenging that, once I finished, I felt invincible. I really felt that there was nothing I couldn't do. So, I started pursuing acting and booked *Set It Off*.

How did that feel?

At the time, I was pretty much accustomed to being a broke artist, so I was just really excited about the craft service! [*laughs*] I would invite my friends, who were also broke artists, to the set to hang out in my trailer so we could all eat. [*laughs*]

You've worked with Denzel Washington three times: (*John Q*, 2002; *The Manchurian Candidate*, 2004; *The Great Debaters*, 2007) What did you take with you from the experience of getting to know him?

Denzel was the first person I met in Hollywood who was also balancing a family life with an acting career. It was just nice being able to meet someone who also had children and was devoted to their family. He validated having those values for me. He taught me that you can be devoted to your family without compromising your art. When we talk, we don't even talk about acting. We talk about our families. Having a family keeps you in touch with life and you have to be in touch with life to create art. Being a mother keeps things in perspective for me. My biggest concern right now is finding my daughter a math tutor. An Academy Award would be very nice...but I really need to find her a tutor! [*laughs*]

You have worked with a list of incredible people. Is there anything you've learned from any other "tutors" besides Denzel Washington? Anything that's really stuck with you?

When I was working with Jonathan Demme on *Beloved*, he whispered into my ear, "You have a muse in you. Just let her be." He said, "Just allow it to flow through you, because it's already there." And that changed me as an actress. I still tell him that he's a part of every character I play. And Oprah Winfrey taught me about grace. She was producing *Beloved*. And she would call me every night after watching the dailies just to give me praise. She taught me a lot about generosity and the importance of celebrating others.

What is the most important thing you get from being an actor?

When I act, I feel closer to the creator than I do just about any other time because, when I act, I am an instrument and I feel myself being used as such. Being used for a purpose. Hopefully, to help people heal through being inspired by a performance. Being a part of a greater good. Serving something bigger than myself.

How did you get involved with *For Colored Girls*?

Tyler Perry and I did *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* together, which was his very first filmmaking experience. We had a lot of fun and discussed the idea of working together again someday. Tyler said that he wanted to wait until he learned more about filmmaking. Then, many movies later, he called me up and said, "I'm ready now." He was excited to share with me how much

he had learned! Tyler is very open to hearing what others have to say and, since I am a writer, too, he showed me some early versions of *For Colored Girls* as he was adapting it. I think I saw three drafts along the way as he was writing. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Enuf* is held in such high regard as an important and sacred piece of African American literature that there are those who feel that it should not have been made into a Hollywood film.

Did any of this have an effect on your decision to be in this film?

Oh, yes. At first, I was one of those people. It is such a beloved piece and I'd seen portions of it done before over the years. I really had a lot of trepidation over how it would possibly work as a film. I was terrified. But, as an actor, it is important to be terrified. Once I'm not terrified as an actor, I'm in a zone that I never want to live in. It's important to be scared and to fight through the fear to get to the next level... unless we are talking about walking through a dark alley or something. [laughs] Tyler came to me trusting me. And I trusted him. So, I committed.

***For Colored Girls* is a very intense and moving film with a lot of extraordinary performances, each woman dealing with a difficult life issue. Your character, Crystal, is dealing with a very brutal, domestic violence situation. How did you prepare to play Crystal? What was your process?**

I live a very peaceful, harmonious life. Crystal does not. So I had to give up a lot of the things that keep me happy. Yoga. Meditation. Prayer. My animals. These are the things that keep me centered. Crystal is not centered. She has no peace. So I stopped allowing myself to have peace. I stopped exercising. My shape changed. I became a different woman. By the time I got to the set, I was stripped completely raw and ready to play Crystal.

What does playing this kind of character do to you emotionally as a person?

In 2007, eighteen months after we were divorced, my husband (photographer Maurice Oldham) died from a blood clot. We had been married for sixteen years and I was mourning for him. I was in a very dark and sad place for quite some time. I had finally come out of it, and was feeling balance in my life and happiness again, when I was offered the opportunity to play Crystal. That's another reason why I had a lot of fear and trepidation over doing this part. I had come through the darkness and arrived at a happy, bright, and positive place in my life. Playing Crystal meant my having to go back into the darkness again. By the time we were through shooting, I actually had fifty more grey hairs than when we started. These kinds of things do take a physical toll. Your physical body does not know the difference between real life and acting. [laughs] What about this role was so important to you that you were willing to make the sacrifice to do it? One of the reasons was because I knew that Crystal represented many, many women. And this film gave me the opportunity to give a voice to these women, to serve these women. When you're given this kind of opportunity, you have to do it with everything you've got. My hope is that women in Crystal's situation can recognize that they are living in the same situation and find, in Crystal's tragedy, the courage not to love the person who is bringing pain and torment into their world more than they love themselves.

Macy Gray has a small role in *For Colored Girls*, and she is wonderful in it. What is it like for a seasoned actor to do a scene with a musician or another kind of entertainer who has little or no theatrical training or acting experience? Does the same charisma and high level of artistry that brings them success in other areas of entertainment just naturally transfer to working on-camera? Or does everyone on the set have to wait around patiently while they have to do multiple takes?

Well, I think Macy was really committed and worked hard and also does have a natural gift for it. And she really did do great work in the film. I think that art is art and the people who are blessed with talent and genius are usually also blessed with the ability to do different things. There's really no need to compartmentalize. Adam Sandler is hilarious, but he can also make you cry. Terrence Howard is an amazing actor and he's also a brilliant musician. I'm just delighted when anybody steps up and gives acting a try. Acting makes me feel so good that I want other people to feel it, too. Even if it's not the main thing that they do.

The places that your talent has taken you so far have been pretty amazing. Standing where you are at this point, is there anything you wish you would have done differently? Do you have any regrets? If I do, I don't remember any of them. I don't live in the past at all. I forget things quickly and move on. All I know is that I need to find my daughter a math tutor. [laughs]