

spotlight

CYNTHIA ERIVO

WHAT MAKES A VOICE **LEGENDARY?**

by joel martens



Best known to U.S. audiences for her performance as Celie in the 2015 Broadway musical revival of *The Color Purple*, Cynthia Erivo took New York by storm, winning the 2016 Tony Award for Best Actress in a Musical as well as the 2017 Grammy Award for Best Musical Theater Album.

Her journey began in the U.K. long before that with multiple roles on stage, in film and television beginning in 2011. Those would eventually lead her in the role of Deloris Van Cartier in the U.K. tour of *Sister Act*, made famous by Whoopi Goldberg's film version. It was during that tour she heard the first rumblings about the story of Celie, *The Color Purple* character she would eventually come to embody so beautifully. Erivo said that she felt it was "meant to be" and as she so beautifully shared, "I didn't know what it was about this show, but when it came to that character, I knew in my heart, in my gut, in my soul, that I needed to do it."

The Rage Monthly spoke with her about her life and what she's up to these days. Discovering that like the roles she tends to choose, she is a strong, complex, thoughtful woman with well thought out opinions and ideas. She is someone who is also acutely aware of the gravitas of each choice she makes on a professional, personal and social level, because of her public stature. She is quite comfortable with that role... even enjoys the challenge of it.

We, too, in the LGBTQ community have had our share of challenges, which is something Erivo understands deeply. She has stepped up to the plate numerous times to show her support. She's a woman who stands by her principles and isn't afraid to talk about what is unjust as well as celebrate what is. A strong spirit who is musically gifted, an amazing storyteller, who is socially aware and intelligent.

We love a good narrative, and she has a great story to share. We can't wait for the next chapter!

I read that you studied music psychology. It must offer a really interesting background as far as how you interpret music. Your point of view is very special, you manage to make a known piece of music very much your own in a way that is really unique and wonderful.

Thank you. I think more than anything I see music as the alternative way of telling a story. I guess the reason it may seem unique and different is that I try to make sure that the story is coming from me and my experience, as opposed to whoever may have written the song or whoever may have told the story. As human beings we have similar experiences in life, many of us fall in love, many of us fall out of love, many of us have been hurt and gone through heartbreak, many of us are happy... all of those things. But they're

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also singularly different for each person.

I've interviewed enough singer/songwriters to know once the piece is written, it's important to let it go. The greatest compliment a singer can give a great writer is to make it their own.

I think so, otherwise there's no point. I feel like because I write music, if I didn't do that, I would be leaving an opportunity behind. When I'm singing a piece of music that isn't written by myself, I infuse it with as much of me as possible. I don't want to go on stage and mimic someone because one, it isn't fair to the person who's done the work before in the first place, and two, it also doesn't serve me very well either. I try to make sure that each individual song has a different voice to it. What I want to do is create a memory that I understand and can fully be truthful about.

"I'm Here" from *The Color Purple* is an example of that for me. Which incidentally, I can't get through without crying because it's so powerful. It's the thing about music that I adore. There is no other way on Earth as far as I'm concerned that communicates emotion as well.

If a person is to be believed and grab the attention of the listener, it has to be completely open and honest. When you open your mouth to sing, you kind of have to tell the truth. The sounds you make are your own and you can't turn it into anything else. Which is probably why emotion and story and truth are so easily communicated through music, because there's no barrier between you and me. We might not all speak the same language, you might not like the same music, but essentially music is a set of notes, a set of cords, and a separate time signature. You just put them in different places and create different sounds, but in the end we all are able to understand it. **That is so true, music is in pretty much every culture on some level. Tell me a little bit about what was it like to be involved in that production of *The Color Purple*. The film was such a seminal moment and then to have it made into such a stunning musical is amazing thing.**

For me it was surreal because when I heard that it was coming, I was in London, I think I was on tour doing *Sister Act*. We were just about to go on stage, and someone said, "I think *Color Purple* is coming, would you go up for the cover? I was like, "No I don't want to go up for the cover, because I want to go up for the lead." I didn't know what it was about this show, but when it came to that character, I knew in my heart, in my gut, in my soul, that I needed to do it. I chased it, I fought for it and then somehow, ended up doing it in the U.K.

I was very happy with that, then somehow all of a sudden we were going to Broadway. Every step of the way it was changing my life, like this sort of weird

out-of-body-experience, where you're sitting and watching as it's happening. This one production, this one character, these pieces of beautiful music, consistently changing my life in real time. It's the weirdest, weirdest thing.

That first moment when people stand up clapping in the middle of the show after "I'm Here," I thought to myself, "Okay, maybe that was a fluke, something that happened just today. It was amazing and it'll never happen again." And, then it kept happening. I sort of realized it wasn't me, it was the song. I think it was the message and hopefully my willingness to be really open and truthful about it. Knowing that you as a person, everything you own and have, all the things that have happened to you or the things that will happen and all the things that haven't... that you are enough. That moment of—I want to say kismet—where everything comes together perfectly.

When choosing your roles, you seem very specific regarding what kind of a character you want to play. Is that something you've focused on as you've gone through your career so far?

Yes. I make it a point to be sure the people I've picked to play are well-rounded women. Sometimes they have to be a woman that I haven't seen before, that never get a chance to be heard. Right now, the woman I'm playing is partially on the spectrum, I think she has Asperger's and she's an investigator. She's different and just odd and I haven't met her before as an actor. But she has all the complexities of a fully-realized women with desires and hopes and fears. She takes what she needs and does what she needs to do in order to survive, without complaining. She's also really feminine and extremely strong at the same time. I love dichotomies and telling stories about women who actually exist, we so rarely see them. I try to make a point that whatever story I tell, it moves the needle forward for any other woman or woman of color who wants to play characters like it, because there is an example of it out there.

It's so important, especially because we're living in such an odd time, politically. There's such a swing away from equality on so many levels. It's interesting though, if you look at what's coming out of Hollywood and what we're starting to see on Broadway—not that there isn't an immense amount of work to be done—but it seems like that it's really evolving. Do you find that to be true?

I think there's tons of work to be done, but I think that we're at a point where people are becoming ready to do it. I guess out of great duress comes wonderful art. You also discover people who are willing to do the hard work, to create a place for those people who would not have that space in the first phase. I like that people are now putting their money where their mouth is. It takes

someone like Jessica Chastain demanding equal pay for women. She tied her contract to Olivia Spencer's and because she did, now you have to pay equally. Or it takes someone putting it in their rider that they have to have more than one person of color on set... It takes all of that. I personally am well and truly ready to be a part of that group of people who just help to make some room. **It's just the nature of the animal—we make progress then the pendulum swings back—it's a process. I'm excited to see you as part of the next group of public figures, because you seem to embody fully the things that you say and the way you speak.**

I try to be a person that talks the talk and walks the walk. I don't believe in saying things if I don't intend on doing them. To me there's no point saying, "I support the LGBTQ community" if I'm not doing anything about it. There is just no sense in it to me. So, I'm the person that will say it and mean it and do something. I'm stubborn in that way, I just want to get it done. (Laughs) Sometimes it takes a small thing to change people's understanding. People think they are progressive and liberal, and they don't have any prejudice about this thing or the other, but then they do these things that are. They maybe don't even realize what those small things are. I'm the type of person that goes, "Just so you know, that isn't right." It's as simple as that, really. People are not perfect and it takes learning and understanding to make that work.

We should talk a little bit about your upcoming concerts. I love the title you chose for the show *Legendary Women's Voices*. Tell me a little bit about why you picked it and what the music is about.

I chose that title because most of the music I'm singing, if not all, has been performed or written by women. Women who have influenced my sound, the music I've listened to, and influenced the way I tell my story. I wanted to pay homage to them, they are the songs I loved to sing the most. It's kind of indulgent because I enjoy this music thoroughly. It's very rare that people get to sing with a symphony orchestra and just be there and sing the songs that they like. I think that people are going to have a really good, decadent evening full of music and they'll come away smiling.

Cynthia Erivo's *Legendary Women's Voices* is part of the San Diego Symphony's Bayside Summer Nights Concert Series. She gives voice to music made famous by the greatest female singers of all time including Aretha Franklin, Nina Simone and Ella Fitzgerald. It takes place on Friday, July 12 at Embarcadero Marina Park South and the symphony especially wants to welcome the LGBTQ community during Pride Weekend. For tickets, call 619.235.0804 or go to sandiegosymphony.org.