SA Alumna Makes Broadway Debut in August Wilson Revival

BY KRISTIN STERLING

Brooklyn native Heather Ali-cia Simms (SOA’96) has been interested in acting since her mother encouraged her to recite a poem in her first talent show at age four. A few years later she had her first role as the mother in “Hansel & Gre-TEL” in an elementary school play. Simms has come a long way over the years and today she is making her Broadway debut alongside Whoopi Goldberg and Charles S. Dutton in August Wilson’s Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom at the Royale Theatre. She is concurrently featured on the big screen, in Chris Rock’s directorial debut film, Head of State.

Originally produced in 1984, Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom takes place over a single day in 1927, in a Chicago recording studio. Singer Ma Rainey (Goldberg) has taken time off from touring to record several songs for a record company at the University. Now, while pursuing her under-graduate degree in history and English at Tufts University, Simms realized that the drama department was not diverse in its repertoire and she created a successful Black Theater Company at the University. Now, one of Heather’s biggest goals as an actress is to convince casting agents and directors to widen their perspective on the roles that black women are chosen to play.

“I could never have dreamed my career would take me in this direction,” says Simms. “I couldn’t ask for a better experience—especially for my first Broadway play. I look at some- one like Whoopi as my mentor. She does it all—TV, movies, theater, producing. That’s what I have always wanted to do.”

To many its seems Simms has also “done it all.” She is a versatile actress who has played numerous roles over the years in theater, movies and television. Her stage cred- its include: Boom, Hook (Playwrights Horizons/Yale Repertory), Splash Hatch on the E Going Down (NY Stage and Film)—both written by SOA alumna Kia Corthron—Insurrection (The Public Theater), Joe Turner’s Come and Gone (Miss-ouri Repertory Theatre), Spunk (Cincinnati Playhouse), and Flyin’ West (Stamford The-atre Works). Simms has also been featured in the films Stompin’ Down at Sugar Love’s and Kings County. On televi-sion she has appeared in Third Watch, Homicide, Law & Order and As the World Turns.

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“Andrei Ser- ban and Anne Bogart were the two people who inspired me at Colum-bia,” recalls Simms. “Their passion for their stu-dents was quite apparent. I believe that they teach because they love to and feel the need to keep the rich tradition of theater alive. I felt challenged and changed and grew stronger in my own convic-tions because of their guid-ance.”

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“Being a Caribbean national, the challenge is that you know you can and desire to play a number of different characters with varying worldviews,” she says. “There are black people living everywhere in the world. I can find a Jamaican restaurant anywhere in the world. So why not conceive of me representing the global diaspora by playing an Irish girl, or a German or Russian? As an actor, that’s what I want to project.”

“What drew Simms to Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom?”

“I absolutely love August’s work,” she says. “When I was asked to audition for the role I had no idea who else would be in the cast. But the opportunity to be in any August Wilson play is not only a thrill for me, but also satisfies the part of me that yearns to delve into the historical back-drop of a period piece. I’ve worked with the director, Mar- ion McClinton, twice before so it was extremely gratifying to come to this place on my jour-ney with a director that I have extreme respect and admira-tion for.”

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“This is what all of the work was about.”

Good to both Dutton and Gold-berg’s characters. Simms plays the role of Dusie Mae, the love inter-est to both Dutton and Gold-berg’s characters.

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Badminton with a View—W. L. (Walter Lawrence) Bogert, AB 1888, AM 1889, took the above photo in 1935. The students are playing badminton on top of Barnard Hall looking east towards Columbia. Low Library is the tall, domed building in the distance.