Queen Latifah stars in HIV drama, Life Support

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Usually glam in her Cover Girl commercials or slapstick hilarious in films like *Bringing Down the House*, Academy Award nominee Queen Latifah is getting serious about HIV in black America in the new HBO drama Life Support, which premieres Saturday, March 10. “This is something that you see everyday walking the streets, something that you can relate to, something that you could touch, ” Latifah told *Real Health* at the film’s premiere in New York City. “I respected [this role more] than other roles I have done.”

Latifah plays ex-drug addict Ana Wallace, a Brooklyn-raised HIV positive wife, mother and AIDS activist struggling to beat her illness and gain acceptance from her mother (Ana Deavere Smith) and her estranged daughter Kelly (Rachel Nicks). Along with a strong ensemble cast which includes Gloria Rueben (*ER*), Evan Ross (*ATL*), Darrin Dewitt Henson (*Soul Food*), Wendell Pierce (*The Wire)*, Tony Rock (*All of Us*) and Tracee Ellis Ross (*Girlfriends*), director Nelson George cast real-life positive people to lend more authenticity and vibrancy to the movie. “It gave the film a connection between the world of film and the world of reality,” he says.

And HIV is a harsh reality among African American women: The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports that 67% of newly diagnosed women are black and that AIDS is the number one killer of black women between the ages 25 and 34. Despite the startling statistics, George believes that black women are still ignored in mainstream media. “When people talked about this disease in the past it was a gay disease or [an epidemic in] Africa.” He adds, “There has not been that kind of championing around black women in America.”

For George this film is about more than generating awareness about HIV. His directorial debut pays homage to HIV positive women who do community outreach, like his sister, Andrea Williams, on whose life the film is loosely based. Williams, who serves as an outreach worker at Brooklyn-based AIDS service organization Life Force, hopes that the film will explode myths surrounding HIV, create a more nuanced understanding of the virus, and increase testing and dialogue in the community. “I hear some people call the disease ‘a monster.’ I don’t see a huge ‘M’ on my forehead,” she says. “[HIV] is not a great thing, but it doesn’t mean that you are dying.”

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