Let Sheryl Lee Ralph's Emmy Acceptance Speech Fill Your Soul [VIDEO]

"I am an endangered species, but I sing no victim's song," belted Sheryl Lee Ralph, a longtime HIV advocate, during her Emmy thank-you speech.

September 13, 2022 By Trent Straube

HIV-positive characters and AIDS television dramas might have been absent from Monday night's 74th Emmy Awards, but the HIV community still had reason to cheer: Longtime HIV advocate Sheryl Lee Ralph won the Emmy for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series, and her phenomenal acceptance speech won the night, the internet and our hearts.

The actress, 65, who took home the award for her role as kindergarten teacher Barbara Howard in Abbott Elementary, began her speech by singing—no, belting—lines from the Dianne Reeves song "Endangered Species." You can watch her acceptance in the video above (the main event starts at the 3:35 mark).

"I am an endangered species," Ralph sang, "but I sing no victim's song. I am a woman, I am an artist and I know where my voice belongs."

She then stated, enunciating as only a gifted performer could, "To anyone who has ever, ever had a dream and thought your dream wasn't, wouldn't, couldn't come true, I am here to tell you that this is what believing looks like. This is what striving looks like. And don't you ever, ever give up on you."

This year marked her first Emmy nomination. Watch her speak more about her award backstage in the clip below:

Television viewers who have watched Ralph for decades—as matriarch Dee Mitchell in the family sitcom Moesha and Felicia Hollingsworth in season 2 of the cancer-themed comedy One Mississippi, for example—may have been surprised to learn that he actress can sang. But not Broadway fans. Ralph originated the role of Deena Jones in the 1983 Dreamgirls (Beyoncé played Jones in the 2006 movie version), for which she was nominated for a Tony Award (Ralph lost to costar Jennifer "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going" Holliday).

Throughout her career, Ralph, 65, has made the time to champion HIV awareness. In a 2007 POZ profile, "Call Me Miss Ralph," she jokingly referred to herself as in the running for "the most fabulous AIDS diva ever to wear a red ribbon." She told POZ that by the time Dreamgirls closed in 1985, she estimated that one third of the cast and crew had died of AIDS-related illness, including the director, Michael Bennett.

In 1990, she founded The DI.V.A. (Divinely Inspired Victorious Award) Foundation to fight HIV stigma and raise awareness. And in 2018, Ralph was honored for her AIDS activism with an award at the annual 365 Black Awards presented by McDonald's. Held during the Essence Music Festival in New Orleans, the awards honored five Black women making a difference in the African-American community.

Ralph wasn't the only Emmy winner to inspire viewers. Singer Lizzo won an Emmy for Outstanding Competition Program for Lizzo's Watch Out for the Big Grrrls. The show also won awards for directing and picture editing.

"When I was a little girl," Lizzo said in her acceptance speech, "all I wanted to see was me in the media. Someone fat like me, Black like me, beautiful like me."

When Ralph won her award, Lizzo joined others in the audience in giving her a standing ovation.

Actress Jackée Harry—who won the Emmy for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series in 1987 for her role as Sandra on the sitcom 227—also offered admiration and thanks.

> Winning my Emmy was a career highlight, but it was also a lonely experience.
>
> For 35 years I've been the only black woman to win Outstanding Supporting Actresses in a Comedy Series.
>
> But that all changes tonight… and it's come full circle!
>
> #Emmys pic.twitter.com/TiyCwASVTI
>
> — Jackée Harry (@JackeeHarry) September 13, 2022

“Winning my Emmy was a career highlight, but it was also a lonely experience,” Harry tweeted. “For 35 years I’ve been the only black woman to win Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series. But that all changes tonight… and it’s come full circle!”

In another tweet, she added, “The network originally wanted @thesherylralph to play Sandra on 227, but I got the part and won an Emmy for it. Now, Sheryl joins me as the 2nd black woman in this category and deservedly so! I’m so excited for her #Emmys win!”

By the way, click the video below if you want to hear the original Dianne Reeves version of “Endangered Species.” And visit Essence.com for an interview with Reeves about the song. Before the Emmy Awarrds, Ralph had sung it during her HIV benefits DIVAS Simply Singing!

“How does somebody, in the midst of their blessing, bless somebody else?” Reeves said of Ralph’s Emmy speech. “That is true sisterhood.”

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