Candidly speaking with Leslie Uggams

Hello, Dolly!

International star power aligns for Theatre Under The Stars

Crys Godoy
The Signal Staff

Theatre Under The Stars opened the grand dame musical “Hello, Dolly!” Feb. 26 with Leslie Uggams leading an all-star, multi-racial cast, continuing a tradition that highlights Houston’s appreciation for progressive artistic representation.

The famous story follows an eccentric matchmaker, “Dolly,” as she meddles into other people’s lives – something she claims to do best. Featuring a rich score, elaborate costumes and show-stopping dance numbers, “Hello, Dolly!” comes complete with songs many may already know by heart – Before The Parade Passes By, It Only Takes A Moment and Hello, Dolly! to name a few.

For all its familiarity, however, TUTS’ rendering of the beloved Jerry Herman musical will have many obvious differences from the version presented by TUTS 15 years ago.

“While ‘Hello, Dolly!’ has been done with a majority-black cast before, TUTS looked first at the star quality of our version’s leading lady, [Leslie] Uggams,” said Roy Hamlin, associate artistic director at TUTS.

“Having appeared before us in color-blind castings for leads in both ‘Anything Goes’ and ‘Into The Woods,’” Hamlin explained, “it was clear that our audiences accepted and welcomed casting choices based on talent and charisma.

Uggams, whose most recent Broadway engagements include “On Golden Pond” and “Thoroughly Modern Millie,” is best known for her portrayal of “Kizzy” in Alex Haley’s “Roots.”

Today, Uggams is at home playing roles that not only challenge her but that push the limits of her considerable talents.

“I am always doing stuff out of my element,” Uggams admits with a hearty laugh. “That’s part of the challenge that I enjoy. It’s part of the risk. Can you do it? Will it pay off?”

TUTS’ choice of multi-racial casting for what may be considered by some to be a story more traditionally suited to an all-Anglican cast did not go unnoticed by Uggams, though she admits she rarely sees herself in racial terms.

“I try to find [projects] that are about the human spirit,” she said with a rise in her voice. “When it comes to the human spirit, there is no color.”

Houston audiences expecting to be regaled by traditional “Hello, Dolly!” costumes, sets and music will not be disappointed.

TUTS’ reputation for producing musicals that at times appear bigger than life does not go unnoticed in the entertainment universe.

“They do it big in Texas,” chuckled Ron Kellum, a world-renowned African-American singer, actor, director and choreographer who plays “Ambrose” to Uggams’ “Dolly Gallagher Levi.”

Kellum, a native of Amareillo, cites TUTS’ announcement to cast Uggams as the deciding factor in his choice to join the multi-racial cast.

“When they asked me and they said that ethnic casting sends a powerful message. ‘Some audience members may be surprised, some may be a little uncomfortable, and I think it’s good, it’s uncomfortable.’

“Hello, Dolly!” runs through March 9. For information regarding ticket prices, including student and group discounts, visit TUTS’ box office at 800 Bag Houston, or call 713-558-8887, Monday through Friday, 9 a.m.-6 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday, 11 a.m.-4 p.m.

Leslie Uggams leads an all-star cast in “Hello, Dolly!”

Q: Did your parents worry about the social prejudices you had to face in the 1950s?

A: “When I was growing up in the business, there was a lot of prejudice against things that I was doing as an African-American performer. I was in a contest where I kept winning every week, and because an African-American boy had won the contest before I started, the sponsor said ‘Well, we’re not going to give the prize to another black kid.’ I was 7 years old and I was in tears. My mother said ‘I don’t want to see you crying about that. You just have to fight for what you want to do. You stumble and go through a lot of unpleasant things along the way. That’s all part of the process.’

Q: How did that advice carry over throughout the years?

A: “I’ve found that under any circumstances ‘you can.’ You just have to fight for what you want to do. You stumble and go through a lot of unpleasant things along the way. That’s all part of the process.”

Q: What would you say to a younger generation who feel the civil rights and women’s rights movements are just pieces of history?

A: “Because of the civil rights movement, more and more sponsors started using men and women of color in commercials, so you started seeing more and more of us having television shows. As far as women are concerned, you know we’re still fighting a lot of prejudice today, but the changes were a little slower in happening.”

Q: What is your passion now?

A: “Leslie Uggams leads an all-star cast in ‘Hello, Dolly!’

Q: How about the women’s movement different?

A: “In my mother’s era, the single woman was frowned upon and you needed a man so that you could be supported. When things started happening in the ’60s and ’70s, women started saying things like: ’OK, I’ve had enough of this. I want power too,’ and ‘I’d rather do this myself.’

Q: What would you say to a younger generation who feel the civil rights and women’s rights movements are just pieces of history?

A: “Shame on them! I’ve always believed that if you don’t know your past, you can’t make your future. I think it’s your duty to know what went on before you so that you can appreciate what you have and take it a step forward. That’s your duty: to know these things and take nothing for granted.”

Q: How much of an effect did the civil rights movement have on the entertainment industry?

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Q: How much of a story is that women still go through even now. It’s very timely.

A: “They were concerned that I remain a lady. I was lucky. When I was growing up you wanted to be a good person. If anything that happened in your career was scandalous, your career could be over. Today, the more of a scandal you are, the bigger the star you are. That’s not a good lesson to send out to young men and women.”

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Q: Considering all the different entertainment mediums you have performed in, do you have a favorite?

A: “I must say live audiences are my preference. It gives you people who are sitting out there. You get the immediate response. Same thing when you do a concert. They’re out there. Performing live is exhilarating.”

Q: Much of your work is now available on the Internet. Has that impacted your career?

A: “Hello, Dolly!” at the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts, Kellum believes the multi-racial casting sends a powerful message. “Some audience members may be surprised, some may be a little uncomfortable, and I think it’s good, it’s uncomfortable.”

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Hello, Dolly!

In a candid conversation, Emmy and Tony Award-winning actress, singer and dancer Leslie Uggams reflects back on the two loves she has propelled her success: her family and her craft.

Q: You began singing professionally at the age of 6. How did your parents feel about what you wanted to be a performer at such a young age?

A: “The one thing I remember my father always saying to me is ‘you can’ and that’s your empowerment: ‘you can.’”

Q: How did that advice carry over throughout the years?

A: “I’ve found that under any circumstances ‘you can.’ You just have to fight for what you want to do. You stumble and go through a lot of unpleasant things along the way. That’s all part of the process.”

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