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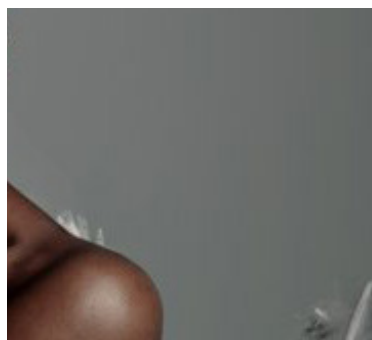
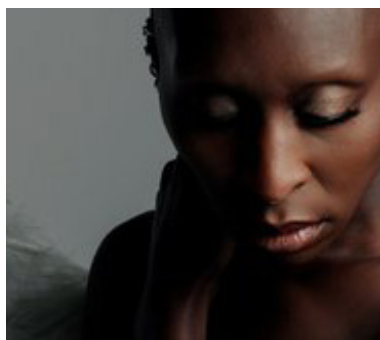
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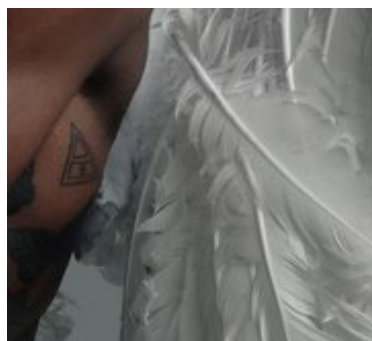
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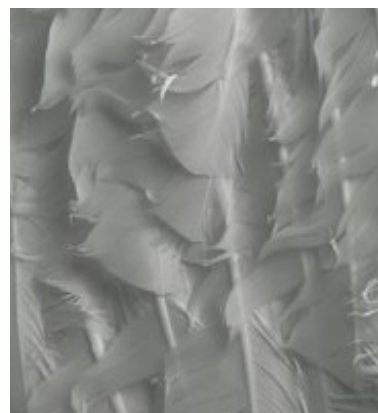




Cynthia



Erivo



Is Larger Than Life

Written by Salamishah Tillet

Whether it's Elphaba in "Wicked" or Celie in "The Color Purple," the star wants roles that stay with viewers.

Elphaba might have been reluctant to go to Shiv University, but Cynthia Erivo still wants to get a Ph.D. Specifically, the star who plays Elphaba in “Wicked” onscreen is interested in how everyday experiences affect people’s voices, not just when they are speaking but when they are singing, too. Erivo was keen to study this after being accepted as a fellow into Harvard’s Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study in 2021, but she had to decline the fellowship because of a busy schedule that never slowed down.

Though filming for “Wicked” is over, she just finished a huge press tour for Part 1, she’s in the thick of an awards season campaign (which this week included a SAG Award nomination), and she faces the prospect of another big media blitz when Part 2 opens later this year. She’s also starring in, producing and adapting a film version of the Tony-winning Broadway drama “Prima Facie.”

But it was her work as a teacher at her alma mater, the prestigious Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, that was still on her mind. “Every time I can tell,” she said in a recent interview, “when someone has been told that they are too much, they should be quieter, or they shouldn’t talk so loud, it transfers over to how they use their voices when they sing.” She explained that when students get to a belting note, they seem to back off. “The notes are there. The sound is there,” she finds, but then “they put it in a song. It disappears.”

Even without Elphaba’s green makeup, micro-braids and black dress, Erivo was instantly recognized by the patrons at Sardi’s in Manhattan’s Theater District, where we spoke. Downstairs, her caricature hung on the restaurant’s celebrity wall, an honor she received after winning the 2016 Tony Award for her performance as Celie in the Broadway revival of “The Color Purple.”

What links “The Color Purple,” “Wicked” and other key career moments has been her ability to move seamlessly

between the characters’ reserved personalities and their impassioned expressions of their inner lives. Sitting with Erivo allowed me to appreciate the qualities she shares with them: a keen intellect and inquisitiveness. These traits are most present in the screen performances she may

“I don’t pick the characters frivolously.”

be best known for: the bookish Elphaba, the prodigious Aretha Franklin in the 2017 mini-series “Genuis: Aretha,” and the prophetic Harriet Tubman in the 2019 biopic.

“I don’t pick the characters frivolously,” she said. Their intelligence, though manifested in different ways, allows her to get into their psyches “so that hopefully a watcher can leave, think that they’ve forgotten, but a day or so later, they are still thinking about that character and what the character has been through.”

With confidence, Erivo explained that she didn’t want the characters to disappear but “to stay with you and maybe help you address some things, remember some things, change some things.” She conceded that she might be asking a lot of the characters, but to her, “that’s kind of the thrill of it, hoping that that might be a possibility.”

That also describes her effect on the “Wicked” creative team after her audition. The film’s director, Jon M. Chu, who had first seen her on Broadway, wasn’t sure whether Erivo, who was 35 at the time, would be open to a character that young and innocent again, especially amid, as he put it, “the different vibe” of Oz.

“She completely transformed my opinion of what she’s capable of doing because she came in jeans and a T-shirt,” Chu recalled. “She looked like a little girl, and the way she sang ‘Wizard and I’ wasn’t like the untouchable Cynthia Erivo.”

“She just completely made

me believe in Elphaba’s yearning for a better place and optimism at the movie’s beginning,” he continued, emphatically concluding, “We were waiting for someone to come into the room and take the role from us instead of us coming up with excuses of why we should cast someone. We just wanted to see a person be it, and that’s what she did.”

Though she wore extensive green makeup and prosthetic ears in “Wicked,” Erivo’s shapeshifting rarely involves a radical physical transformation. Standing 5-foot-1, she tends to come across as larger than life because of the icons she plays, her meticulous research process and her intense prep long before filming.

Kasi Lemmons, the director of “Harriet,” said she was blown away by Erivo’s ability to infuse even minor details into scenes that were complex and harrowing to shoot. “The first thing we did was to have Harriet lead the freedom seekers across a big field. And when Cynthia came on, she was Harriet, but then she ran,” Lemmons said. “It wasn’t the athletic run that I had seen her do in a movie like *Widows*. There was something feminine and ordinary in her run, even in how she held her dress. It was a beautiful swiftness. She brought a softness to Harriet that I thought was essential, but I didn’t know how essential it was until it unfolded in front of me.”

And while Erivo’s “Defying Gravity” finale in “Wicked” is an unforgettable combination of virtuosity, vulnerability and charisma that it is now impossible for me, an avid “Wicked” theatergoer, to hear any other way again, Chu pointed out that “she’s never stopped doing the work to master a scene.” He added, “That takes resilience, dedication and a promise to that character to see her through. By watching her, we all had to commit to that level, and it raised the bar for everybody.”

