Eartha Kitt to be featured on HistoryMakers

by Earl Calloway
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Julieanna Richardson, founder and president of The HistoryMakers, a digital biographer and archivist of Blacks who influence history, announced that Eartha Kitt will be featured in An Evening with Eartha Kitt and will be interviewed by veteran journalist Gwen Ifill Saturday. The show will look at Kitt's career as a versatile artist and her extraordinary accomplishments that span more than six decades.

Kitt made her professional dance debut with the Katherine Dunham Dance company, performing in such modern creations as Blue Holiday, Bal Negre and Casbah.

She was recognized as being among the finest of Dunham's dancers, along with Vanoye Aikens, Lucille Ellis, Linwood Morris and Jean Leon Destine.

Kitt's autobiography was classified with other prominent African American famous personalities including W. C. Handy's Father of the Blues, Taylor Gordon's Born to Die, Louis Armstrong's Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans, Ethel Waters' His Eye Is On The Sparrow, Lena Horn's Lena, Sammy Davis' Yes, I Can and Billie Holiday's Lady Sings the Blues.

Kitt was one of the early African Americans to have had musicals created for them on Broadway. In fact, she performed the title role to Mrs. Patterson in 1953 that was written by Charles Sebree and the co-star was Greer Johnson.

Kitt was born January 17, 1927 and later discovered that her mother was mixed with Cherokee Indian and her father was white.

In an interview with the Defender, Kitt said she was an orphan who had little knowledge of her relatives until later in life.

She was eventually moved from South Carolina to New York where she attended elementary school and Metropolitan High School.

Before studying with Katherine Dunham and becoming a professional dancer, she supported herself with a job in Brooklyn.

Touring with Dunham, Kitt developed friends and ultimately traveled to Mexico, toured Europe, and danced in the Prince of Wales Theatre. Eventually the troupe reached Paris where many Negroes lived.

She told how they would meet on the sidewalk café's in Paris and share their food and discuss life as they also debated situations that affected them, mentioning such standout as James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Oscar Peterson, Sidney Bechet and others.

She returned to the United States killed in New York, but the world-renowned entertainer returned to Europe to continue her career.

Crowds welcomed her in Europe.

During her career Kitt was accused of insulting Lady Bird Johnson, wife of President Lyndon B. Johnson, and as a result, suffered professional problems.

She was refused performance opportunities because she made an anti-war statement, though Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. complimented Kitt for her frank comment.

During the 1990s, Eartha Kitt was the voice in The Jungle Book and The Wild Thornberrys, and The Emperor's New Groove providing the voice of the villainess Yzma, for Disney.

Kitt also starred as the fairy godmother in Cinderella, co-starred in the Broadway musical The Wild Party, played in Anything But Love, Holes and Nine, and is the voice in the song Santa Baby.

Kitt said, "I'm still busy in entertainment and I am featured annually at the Café Carlyle in New York where Bobby Short appeared for many, many years."

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Friends of La Rabida to salute Merri Dee at ‘Big Top Ball’

The Grand Ballroom of Four Seasons Hotel will take on a circus atmosphere when Friends of La Rabida Children’s Hospital hosts its annual fundraiser on Friday honoring Merri Dee, WGN-TV’s retiring community relations director and its Children’s Charities’ manager. The Big Top Ball committee is co-chaired by Joli Burrell and Bob Arthur

and since mid-July, the group has raised millions of dollars for various clinics and service programs at La Rabida, the only hospital in the country solely dedicated to children with lifelong medical conditions or who have suffered abuse and neglect. Located on the southern shores of Lake Michigan (at 45th St.), La Rabida has been caring for children for 112 years, regardless of their ability to pay.

Proceeds from the black tie dinner will support the Joli Burrell Children’s Advocacy Centers (in Chicago and Park Forest), which serve kids with traumatic experiences, such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, burns, witnessing family violence and violent crimes.

Among planning committee members:

Linda Johnson Rice, Diane Dinkins Carr, Lyle Logan, Heather Morris, Jacqueline N’Namdi, Regina Daniels and lots of others.

ABC 7’s Cheryl Burton is emcee; actor-author Steve Schirripa is host. The evening kicks-off with cocktails at 7 p.m. Individual $500 tickets can be reserved by calling LaVerne Mathews, (773) 753-9602.

Newsy Names—“Highly hilarious” and “scripturally unscripted” is how Yvette Moye describes Real Men Charities’ second annual Roast & Toast on Dec. 13 at South Shore Cultural Center, celebrating state Senate President Emil Jones, soon to be retired... Cong. Danny Davis (7th), Ill. Commerce Commissioner Lia Ford, Judge E. Kenneth Wright, Dr. Herbert C. Harris, Dr. Lewis Baskins, Atty. Thomas Vaughn and ShoreBank’s Robert Nash receive “Distinguished Alumni” citations.

Makin’ History—Eartha Kitt, 81, (born Eartha Mae Keith in North, S.C.), an international show biz legend indeed (stage, screen and recordings), will be saluted by Julicann Richardson and The HistoryMakers on Saturday at a PBS-TV special, An Evening with Eartha Kitt, to air in February ’09. The interview and performance (Kitt will sing several of her signature hits) will be video-taped before a live audience at Northwestern U’s Thorne Auditorium. Washington Week’s award-winning correspondent Gwen Ifill will conduct the interview and host the career retrospective.

Merri Dee will emcee. The HistoryMakers, a national non-profit, is the world’s largest African American archival collection.

A performer in the truest sense of the word, Kitt’s career has spanned over six decades. She’s an author, two-time Daytime Emmy winner who’s raised over a million dollars to benefit African American schools and frequently gives benefit performances for HIV/AIDS organizations. In 1968, you remember, she encountered a professional setback when she made anti-war remarks at a White House luncheon, reportedly causing first lady Lady Bird Johnson to cry. Just last year, Kitt co-starred in an independent film, And Then Came Love, with Vanessa Williams and Irwin Corey.

TV-OP Fest—Miliana L. Walter, former NBC 5 exec, is the brains behind TV-OP International Televison Festival this Friday and Saturday at Columbia College Chicago’s Film Row, 1104 S. Wabash. The second annual two-day event, “Creating Program Diversity and Career Opportunities in TV and Broadband Programming,” will focus on opening doors of opportunity for professionals of color and women in the powerful medium of television, Walter says. “Only one of its kind, it was created to advocate diversity in front of and behind the camera and connect enter- prise-enrepreneurial creators of viable, entertaining productions with global companies in need of quality content.”

Newly christened TV-OP, the fest follows the successful soft introduction in 2007 at the Black Harvest Film Festival. Nielsen Media Research and TV One have returned to join Columbia College as the presenting sponsors of this effort to expose talented producers with their multicultural stories and varied viewpoints to key industry decision-makers.

In 2007, the festival awarded Joseph L. Lewis II and Eugene Haynes, co-creators of the animated pilot, The Adventures of Teddy P. Brings, an all-expense-paid trip to TV One headquarters to meet and pitch their executives. It also honored Emmy winner, Barbara A. Allen, with the first Chicago TV Excellence Award for her work on Paper Trail: 100 Years of the Chicago Defender and featured panel discussions and presentations by top executives such as Johnathan Rodgers, TV One’s CEO; Bruce DuMont, Museum of Broadcast Communications’ president; Ken Smulke, Target Market News’ president; Jenny Alonso, Lifetime Entertainment’s former EVP.

Amy Hilliard, Brenda Sexton and Abe Thompson co-chair Saturday’s Awards Ceremony which will induct Nat King Cole in TVOP’s Hall of Fame for his groundbreaking and inductive episodes, 1956-1957. His twin daughters, Timolin and Case, co-founders of the Nat King Cole Generation of Hope Foundation Inc., will accept the award. Also honored: creators of multicultural TV productions, including vintage TV and reality shows, plus comedy, drama, animation and documentaries. For tickets to the fest and info on the extensive, jam-packed schedule, visit www.tv-opfestival.com or call (312) 588-1500.

Breakfast Bonus—ESPN columnist-commentator Scoop Jackson addresses the 11th May-Boy Breakfast hosted by Concerned Christian Men Saturday at Simeon Career Academy and Prof. James Wilson "unlocks the secrets to success in math." Spirited sports competition is the agenda and always welcome at this monthly tradition are men 18 and over ($5 donation) and young men 6-17 (free). Call George Glenn, CCM founder, (773) 401-0025; email stgd@yahoo.com or visit www.concernedchristianmen.org. CCM is celebrating 13 years serving African American youngsters.

Mardi Gras Fun—Wear a colorful mask and join ComEd’s Angel Perez and Citizen Group’s Bill Garth on Friday at Chatham Business Association’s Annual Awards Gala & Mardi Gras Celebration at the Holiday Inn Mart Plaza. Other hosts include Joseph Caldwell, Dr. Felicia Blasingame, Leonard Harris and Monica Thomas. Call (773) 994-5066.

On Air— Paul Lisnek, Comcast CN100 anchor, has joined WGN-TV’s weekend lineup as host of his self-titled radio show that airs Sundays, 4-5 p.m., live on 1690 AM and streamed live on WGN.com, says Melody Spann-Cooper, president/GM. Lisnek also hosts Political Update on CN 100 (The Comcast Network), anchors Newsbreakers on CNN Headline News, serves as a political analyst for WGN-TV and his analysis and commentary has been heard on NBC’s Today Show and CNN’s Anderson Cooper 360. For some he’s a regular guest on radio icon Cliff Kelley’s show, discussing all things politics, law, entertainment and current events.

Sump’n Extra Online!—Besides Wednesday’s weekly print version, be sure to check out ChicagoDefender.com online each Monday and Friday for possible “Teepee’s Town” content, or email teesee@chicagodefender.com.