

aurora

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2007

Ready to Rumble
Fall's tough new clothes

What a Faker
The scoop on faux designer bags

Dreamgirl
Sharon Leal
sets her sights
on the future

\$3.95 US \$5.95 CAN



0 74470 57731 0



Her Star Turn

Dreamgirl Sharon Leal looks forward to a season to remember with two feature films set for release starring such heavy hitters as Tyler Perry, Janet Jackson and Chris Brown, not to mention a music career still lingering on her mind.

STORY Teena Apeles PHOTOS Charlize Lin

WARDROBE STYLIST Kendrick Osorio, Factory Artists

HAIR Marcia Hamilton for JBeverly Hills HAIR ASSISTANT Courtney Rindock

MAKEUP Caren Elle @ Photogenicsmedia.com using Shu Uemura

LOCATION Shot on the rooftop of The Mercury luxury highrise condos in Los Angeles' Koreatown.



The

Four Seasons Beverly Hills is a people-watching paradise. Among those who are passing through the hotel's restaurant on this warm June afternoon are British menswear designer and reality star Ozwald Boateng, a very pale John Travolta, and the predictable parade of done-up socialites and stressed-out industry folk walking with an air of haughtiness as an army of Four Seasons' staff swarm to please them all.

Then Sharon Leal walks in. Sure, she's stunning (Boateng takes notice as she walks by), but in a very naturally graceful, unassuming way. The 5-foot-8-inch Filipina (yes, she's Asian) and African American beauty wears little make-up — with glowing skin like hers, there's no need — and a casual dress, with her curly dark hair loosely pinned back. She's immediately warm and kind as she introduces herself. She just has an hour to spare, as a last-minute meeting about a project (that has been a stop and start process) with Oscar winner Cuba Gooding, Jr. was added to her afternoon schedule. (She ended up landing it.) Leal apologizes profusely, but, as she says, "That's what you do — here we go, put me through it," referring to the realities of keeping in step with Hollywood.

Though Leal, a very youthful 34, just had her Hollywood feature film debut in 2006's Oscar-nominated *Dreamgirls* as Michelle Morris — a.k.a. "the girl who replaces Jennifer Hudson's character" in the Motownesque all-female singing group — she's no stranger to the entertainment world. Before appearing alongside the film's celebrity powerhouse lineup of Hudson, Beyoncé, Eddie Murphy and Jamie Foxx, Leal had starred in various Broadway musicals, was a regular on a daytime soap and enjoyed a four-season stint as Marilyn Sudor on David E. Kelly's primetime drama *Boston Public*.

These days Leal is making her mark on the big screen with two upcoming films, "dramedies" she calls them, coming out later this year, with such heavyweights as Janet Jackson, Tyler Perry, Regina King and Loretta Devine.

Currently a Los Angeles resident who is happily married to screenwriter Bev Land and mother to a 5-year-old son, the singer, songwriter and actress recalls how she — with a little help from her *barkada* (friends) — went from

community theatre in the Central Valley city of Fresno, Calif., to the stages of New York City, and eventually to her Hollywood fairy tale in the making.

Island Girl to Suburban Showstopper

Leal was born in Tucson, Ariz., where her father was briefly stationed in the Air Force. Then her parents, who met in the Philippines, brought the newborn back to the islands where she spent her days on the beaches, learning to swim. "I have vivid memories of being out there and my mom's family in Manila and also in Pampanga, because my mother's parents were literally living in huts," she says.

She lived on the islands until she turned 6, after which her family moved back to the States and settled in Fresno, where Leal's mother remarried and treated her daughter to a "full Filipino" upbringing. When asked to elaborate, she lists some key "You Know You're Filipino When ..." descriptions: "It was prom night, and I said, 'Mom could the house not smell like fish and *bagoong* (shrimp paste) when my American friends come in?', and shoes come off at the door, and we've got our little brooms, and rice is always in the rice cooker," she says, laughing. "It's like full-on Filipino mode, which is challenging when you look the way I look." People have always assumed Leal was African American or "something completely random" such as Hawaiian or Puerto Rican, but rarely ever Filipino.

Leal speaks a little bit of Tagalog, thanks to her mom who "talks to me all the time in Filipino." But Leal hopes to be fluent some day. Over the years, she's been interviewed by Filipino media, during which she realized how much studying she had ahead of her despite crash courses beforehand courtesy of her mom and some "Learn Tagalog Quick" tapes.

As to whom she credits for her penchant for the spotlight, she's not sure where her love for entertaining comes from as neither of her parents is arts-inclined. "My father says that I've been talking about singing and performing since I could speak," she says. "It just was something I think I just was born to want."



At an early age Leal also penned her own music. "Really silly songs," she says. "At recess with my friends in elementary school, we'd just make up little melodies and I was always sort of trying to put on some show." The enterprising young Leal even charged for her performances, inviting neighborhood kids to see her shows in the family's garage, finding every opportunity to showcase her singing and acting skills to whatever audience she could round up.

Big City Fever

In grade school, a teacher noticed that Leal was a star in the making and encouraged her parents to send her to a performing arts school. "We had lived on sort of the other side of the tracks growing up. We didn't have a lot of money," she reveals, "and my teacher knew about a magnet program across town with all the rich kids and she spoke to my mom." Though wary at first, her mom eventually enrolled Leal in the program, which was affiliated with the community theatre. Acting in their productions together with the music and dance training from school helped pave the teenager's path to New York's grand stages. "If I can just get to Broadway my life is made," Leal recalls thinking during high school. Then her fellow Filipino coworkers at the time alerted her to an opportunity. "One of the Filipino women clipped out an ad in an Asian newspaper and said, 'They're casting for *Miss Saigon* and they're looking for Asian Americans,'" Leal recounts. "At the time I thought they're not going to believe I'm Asian American — look at me," she says. "I assumed they would just turn me away saying, 'You're not Asian enough.'"

But she overcame her doubts, made the trip to San Francisco and was chosen from some 600 girls to play the role of Gigi, who sings the musical's opening song. "It was just one of those weird, amazing developments ... I just hit it." Leal was 19 at the time, and by 20 — and very green, she admits — she moved to New York and joined the Broadway company for two and a half years. Leal later found herself an agent, who got her a gig on *The Guiding Light* in 1998. She then returned to the stage as Mimi in the touring company of *Rent*. But the small screen still wanted to see more of the dark-eyed beauty, and by 2000

Leal had moved to Los Angeles to star in the controversial high school drama *Boston Public*. "Obviously that was my first year in L.A. and my first pilot season so it was a big deal that early in my career," she says.

The Stars Align

When she auditioned for *Dreamgirls*, again, the actress's diffidence had her thinking that she was a long shot for the role of Michelle, who initially plays secretary to Foxx's character before becoming one of the Dreams. "At the time I felt if I could just sort of play in the background in one of the numbers I would be happy," she admits. "I just thought this is a really big, big film and I knew how many people were trying to get in and I knew people couldn't even get auditions let alone stand a chance of actually booking it, so I was so thrilled when I did."

The actress gushes when she recounts her experience of filming the movie. "I was so star struck with Eddie Murphy, who I just loved, and Beyoncé, obviously, and Jamie," she says. "Everybody was just really excited and when you have huge stars who are really excited then you can imagine how some of us, who felt like we just got this huge break, were feeling. We were like jumping out of our skin."

Costar Anika Noni Rose, who plays fellow Dreams member Lorrell, befriended Leal during the shoot and commends her for making Michelle "something more than set dressing." Referring to the scene in which Leal's character is first introduced, when she breaks off her fake nails to become a secretary, Rose says, "Sharon barely said a word and yet you were able to feel every emotion in that small scene. In spite of the size of the role, she brought a warmth, an earthiness and a realness to the character." But apart from Leal's talent, Rose treasures her loyalty as a friend and genuine good nature. "I love that she doesn't take the business of life so seriously that she can't laugh at herself ... or you," she says. "I love her ability to be a supportive friend in a business that easily and often pits women against each other."

Since the success of *Dreamgirls*, Leal has been busy racking up more movie credits. She shot the Screen Gems/Sony







Pictures production *This Christmas*, which features an ensemble cast including Mekhi Phifer and Delroy Lindo, portraying a middle-class family who gather for the holidays. Leal describes it as a black *The Family Stone*. "There's a lot of drama that comes about when they all get together, but it's a really sweet film," she says. "It's got a lot of heart." In it, Leal plays Kelli, the daughter who works in the commercial industry in New York. "She's very ambitious and very outspoken and very single." She was especially excited about the role because up till this project, she never really had the opportunity to play sassy. "I always play kind of even-tempered characters, but Kelli definitely is a ballsy, fun character."

Leal also spent some time in Atlanta and Vancouver to shoot *Why Did I Get Married?*, which Tyler Perry wrote, directed and stars in, along with mega superstar Janet Jackson. As the film's title suggests, the story follows married couples who are all best friends and chronicles what's going on in their respective relationships.

If Clint Culpepper, the president of Screen Gems and perhaps Leal's biggest fan ("I've memorized all her numbers," he proudly admits), has any say, movie audiences will have plenty of opportunities to be charmed by Leal, just as he was after seeing her work on *This Christmas*. "I already have three to four movies in mind for her — she's that great," he says by telephone. "She has a fantastic singing voice, she's a great actor, a professional on the set and very charismatic. She's so good and so natural, I want to work with her forever."

Keeping the Music Playing

Leal expresses how fortunate she has been with the opportunities that have come her way, and feels especially blessed that singing has come hand in hand with many of her roles. "I never really felt throughout the course of my career that I had to give up singing," says Leal. "As a kid, I didn't want to do films or do television. I just thought I want to make records [*labels, take note!*], I want to sing, I want to be on Broadway."

Over the last few years, Leal's film and TV career has certainly been her focus, and she hopes to return to theatre again, specifically in New York, but music still is one



of her greatest passions. "I can rank it up the highest since I've had the most struggle trying to push that off the ground," she admits. "I think with music, a lot of time is needed, especially when you're trying to write, it takes all of your attention and I haven't had that space."

When she was on *Boston Public*, Universal Records offered her a record deal, but unfortunately the timing wasn't right. "I didn't want to rush to just sort of come out with something that didn't feel organic to me. And so through all that time and that searching, the deal was over and it was just like, 'OK, well that's done and now we'll just have to come back to it,'" she remembers. "And I'm still sort of figuring out how to finagle that or how to make that happen."

She notes that fellow Filipino artists have encouraged her to continue producing music. "I've got some Filipino friends who have a production company called Kuya, which means older brother. Sammy Gerongco, who is sort of the head of that little production, was in *Saigon* with me, and he called and said, 'I got some tracks — you want to come in and just write and we'll put it on MySpace? What could it hurt?'"

Uploading those songs on MySpace (myspace.com/sharonleal) has proved to be a good start in building a fan base for her music. And with 30,000-plus plays of Leal's recordings on her webpage, including the oh-so-catchy R&B ditty "I Won't Say," there is definitely a sizeable contingent eager to hear her soulful, upbeat melodies.

Border Crossing

Of course, as a mother and wife, Leal has more than music and movies on her mind. Her screenwriter husband of seven years, Land, is as supportive as any wife could ask for, dedicated to helping her achieve her many dreams. When she's away on shoots he "holds down the fort" and plays Mr. Mom to their son, Kai, who seems to have inherited his mother's love for entertaining. "My son at 5 is already the biggest ham on the block and he's begging for tap lessons right now," she says, smiling. "He doesn't want to do T-ball, he wants to tap and he likes to sing."

She mentions Kai "looks like a little Italian boy," and is of even more mixed heritage than herself, with his father being

Italian, Irish and Cuban. Leal hopes that he won't have to face the kind of scrutiny about his background as she faced as a child — or obstacles as a performer. "It irritated me to no end when I was young and I never really got used to it," she admits. "I remember going to the grocery store or going to a fast food restaurant and the people would just look at me and ask, 'What are you?'" It was a very confusing time for Leal, not knowing how to grapple with that question at such a young age. "Because both my parents were Asian, light-skinned, I know that kids would say, 'Did they adopt a little black girl?'"

As far as how Leal's physical appearance has played out in her career, she is usually cast as an African American, but hopes "to tap into the Asian side in a big role somewhere down the line." One day it would also be great to simply be who she is — an Asian African American. Though it wouldn't hurt if fellow Asian Africans like Allan Pineda Lindo of Black Eyed Peas joined forces on projects. "He's the same mix as me. We have to stick together," she jokes. "It would be perfect [to collaborate], he's just like my lost brother."

All joking aside, Leal has continued to be active in the Asian entertainment community. She was a presenter at the recent Asian Excellence Awards that aired on E! and AZN, at which she also received a nod for Outstanding Supporting Actress for her *Dreamgirls* role. "It's always nice to go and represent," she says, and to reveal to audiences her Asian heritage.

In the meantime, she just hopes to "just keep those wheels moving" and keep performing. "I've been totally convinced that this is what I'm here to do," she says. "I'm having fun through the process and so that's all it's about. I don't actively try to get myself in every magazine. I'm just not a hustler by nature. I concentrate on doing good work and hopefully that will bring me into people's awareness."

It's time for Leal to rush to her next appointment, and when she passes through the lobby of the Four Seasons, the cast of tourists, looky-loos, suits and socialites have no clue that a real talent just walked by. But likely, come the release of her new movies, they will. And come then, the loveable Miss Leal — who Culpepper claims is the "real, real deal" — will have plenty of reasons to swagger. ☘