

# Whoopi, Frankly

A funny thing happened on their way to Broadway: Whoopi Goldberg and Frank Langella fell in love. In a big way—as they will tell you. In her latest incarnation, she plays Fontanne to his Lunt. By Nancy Jo Sales

IT WAS AN “OPEN REHEARSAL” of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, which really meant that Whoopi Goldberg, the show’s new star as of February 11, would deliver two songs to a throng of mostly videographers and paparazzi. Publicity.

The paparazzi stood waiting for an hour in the cold lobby of the St. James Theater, grousing and gossiping the way they always do. “Whoopi’s put on some weight,” said one. “She goes out with white guys,” ventured another. “Now she’s with that *Dracula* guy—Langella.”

“She *hates* paparazzi,” another said. He told a story about how the actress had chased a fellow photog-

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rapher down Madison Avenue, taking off her shoe and throwing it at him. The paparazzi laughed, appreciatively.

They were finally ushered into the theater. An unmistakable voice came over the sound system. "The use of flash photography is prohibited, because it bothers the performers and makes them nervous." The photographers laughed again. This was Goldberg at her most disarming, in her best-known persona.

She came onstage and sang. There was no orchestra, only piano accompaniment. A few days before, the *Daily News* had run a gossip item saying that her singing "could augur the decline and fall of the Roman musical comedy." But Goldberg sounded fine—particularly during the number "Free," in which Pseudolus the slave tries to imagine himself (or in Goldberg's case, herself) liberated.

The paparazzi clapped for her. "I see you, Michael Musto!" Goldberg flirted with the bespectacled *Village Voice* gossip columnist as she marched off jauntily, stage left. Musto, sitting in the theater, blinked.

"People either love her or they don't," said one paparazzo, growing philosophical. "But, *eh*, she's not bad."

The photographers dispersed into the street, toting their bags full of images of Whoopi.

WHOOPI GOLDBERG OPENS THE DOOR OF her hotel suite on the Upper East Side. Today her voice is a low, smoky purr. "Hey, how you doin'?"

It's 10 A.M. and Whoopi's draped in a coarse beige tunic and roomy pants, athletic socks, floppy shoes. She could almost wear the costume onstage in *Forum*. "They're making my toga a little longer so my ass won't look like a shelf," Whoopi says flatly, turning around for the view. "Child, please, I will look like Huggy Bear."

Whoopi orders coffee for me—but not for herself. She doesn't like it. "Never have." She sits back in her chair and smokes a Marlboro, her fifth today. Her eyes squint against the smoke of her cigarette and perhaps fatigue. She has been in rehearsal for ten weeks, and it hasn't been easy. "I'm kind of zipping in there, going, 'Okay, is this it, left foot? Oh, fuck it, left foot.' But I didn't want to run back to the movies, where it's kind of cushy and soft, so I thought, *Oh*, fuck, I'll try this. I'll go on."

The hotel waiter appears with the tray, fiddling with it, clanking spoons. He has a large, old-fashioned key dangling from his neck and a nervous efficiency in the presence of Whoopi the Star.

Whoopi comes back from closing the door behind him. And suddenly, she *is* him. "Ooh, will that be all, suh? . . . I am a Charles Dickens character!"

Whoopi chuckles and shakes her head. Sometimes, she just performs for herself. Her enormous dreadlocks bang together.

NOW WHOOPİ'S BOYFRIEND ENTERS THE ROOM.

He is Frank Langella, the "Dracula guy." He is also the Albee guy (with a Tony award for *Seascape*) and the *Amadeus* guy (he originated the role of Salieri on Broadway). Currently, Langella

stars as the egocentric Garry Essendine in Noël Coward's *Present Laughter*.

At Langella's approach, Whoopi's mood shifts again. It's as if her inner soundtrack has suddenly switched from something jazzy to something classical, with a lot of cello.

"I'm a Broadway *new* baby," she says. "And he is the Broadway *king*."

Langella smiles tightly at me, discreetly ignoring the compliment, and arranges himself on a chair to Whoopi's right. Langella is one of the few people in the world who would look natural balancing a cigarette holder (unlike Whoopi, though, he is not a smoker). World-wearily droopy-eyed, elegant, he's got on a pair of pants so soft you could polish diamonds with them; a shirt so white it seems to glow.



Whoopi as Pseudolus in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (top); with former flame Ted Danson (left); in her original Broadway show (right).

"I think they would be the first to admit that they're an odd couple," says David Richenthal, a friend and *Present Laughter*'s producer.

The odd couple gently holds hands.

They haven't done a joint interview before. They have avoided it in part because, in the past, Whoopi has taken some beatings in the press.

"I WILL BE VERY SURPRISED IF YOUR EDITOR DOESN'T SAY, 'REMIND them about the Friars Club,'" sighs Whoopi.

My editor didn't say that. But what Whoopi's referring to is, of course, the time in 1993 when her then-boyfriend, actor Ted Danson, appeared in blackface at New York's Friars Club and roasted her in an unforgettable fashion. "We've



been so busy—we haven't seen each other in a coon's age!" Danson erupted from the podium—one of his more printable statements.

In a storm of press condemnations afterward, Whoopi quickly admitted to having written most of the jokes. She said her motivation had come from, among other things, the hate mail the couple had received from white supremacists.

But Whoopi had some other issues surrounding her relationship with Danson, issues she has been battling with mixed success over the years.

"I don't think people jumped on us because we were an interracial couple," she said after the Friars Club event. "They jumped on us for all the other reasons. It was the big, rich, very sexy man from *Cheers* and Whoopi, who was, like, considered asexual for, you know, the first nine years in Hollywood."

She has often complained of how, while she has been cast as maids and criminals and floozies, she has rarely been given the chance to try a romantic lead. It was eight years (her first movie, *The Color Purple*, was released in 1985), fourteen films, and one Oscar (Best Supporting Actress, for 1990's *Ghost*) before Whoopi got the chance to even kiss a man onscreen.

That man was Danson, in 1993's *Made in America* (a miscegenation story carefully displaced onto a sperm bank). But if their onscreen affair didn't turn around her Hollywood image (she most recently appeared, in *The Associate*, as a woman posing as a man), it may have done something to affect her self-image. She once told an interviewer, "I always thought I was very ugly." And, more recently, "The last man I went with, that kind of woke people up. Like: You must be cute. If he thinks you're cute, there must be something there. And frankly, the older I get, the better-looking I get."

FOR WHOOPI, HOWEVER, TED DANSON was only a transitional figure, a stage through which she passed; perhaps a "passage." In fact, there is a Zen-like feel to the story Whoopi tells about her love for Frank Langella. "This thing of mine with Frank," she says, "has been going on for a very long time."

Langella sits gazing at her with a mixture of amusement and reverence.

"We didn't meet until *Eddie*," Whoopi says, "but this was somebody that I always wanted to know. . . ." Her eyes are closed now, as if to see the movie flickering up on the screen in her brain. In *Eddie*, Whoopi played an NBA coach and Langella the team's Steinbrenner-like owner. By the end of filming, Langella was getting a divorce from his wife of eighteen years, while Whoopi was detaching herself from her husband of eighteen months, the labor organizer Lyle Trachtenberg.

"I always believed," Whoopi says, "that I would know Frank from the time that I was a very young woman." Langella's watching her even more intently now, his chin slung in hand.

"My only experience with Frank had been from the cinema," says Whoopi. "I was 14 the first time I saw him in *Twelve Chairs*. And then the following week, I saw *Diary of a Mad Housewife*." In that film, Langella played a sadistic, self-centered womanizer.

"When we finally met, I made my mother clarify and stamp the fact that I have always believed I would know him. And my mother said to him, 'Oh, yeah, since she was 14 you have been a focal point for her. . . .'"

WHEN WHOOPI WAS 14, SHE WAS LIVING IN THE CHELSEA PROJECTS, on 25th Street between Ninth and Tenth Avenues.

I used to live across the street from there. On one particular day—it was summertime—I had an encounter that always stuck in my mind. There were kids playing with a tennis ball in the street and old people, grandparents, sitting out on lawn chairs watching them.

"I knew Whoopi when she was Caryn," said an old lady who had lived in the Chelsea Projects for 30 years. "I don't know why she goes around saying she was a drug addict and all that stuff. I knew her mother. Caryn was a nice girl."

Ever since Whoopi Goldberg became a star—in 1983, after Mike Nichols brought her to Broadway with her stunning one-woman character show, *Whoopi Goldberg*—the story that has traveled around with her is that she was a teenage junkie from the ghetto.

In fact, Caryn Johnson was a nice Catholic-school girl; she attended St. Columba, a few blocks away from the Chelsea Projects. She was the type of girl who went to the movies on Saturday with her mother and mooned over matinee idols—guys like Frank Langella.

As public housing goes, the Chelsea Projects aren't actually that bad. The surrounding neighborhood is middle-class. Caryn Johnson's father had gone away, but she and her brother, Clyde, were provided for by their mother, Emma Harris, a nurse and Head Start teacher. Enrolled in acting classes at the age of 8 (at the Helena Rubinstein Children's Theater), Caryn briefly attended the High School of the Performing Arts. She dropped out; Whoopi said early on that she'd had trouble because she had been labeled "retarded." It is hard to imagine. She also talked about a heroin problem. "Junkies never know they have to stop," she told *Ebony* in 1985, "and I don't know how I did." She said that she had married her drug counselor, a man whose name has never appeared anywhere.

As late as 1991, *Ebony* was continuing the tale of Whoopi's dope-addled beginnings: "Hers was a life and death struggle with drugs . . . and degradation . . . a tortured tango with the devil for her soul."

In the past few years, however, Whoopi appears to have grown tired of the smacked-out Horatio Alger version of her life. "How I had to pull myself up from degradation, how I was layin' in the gutter, it just wasn't like that," she said a couple of years ago.

Today, Whoopi tells me that at 18, "I was married and very happy to have a kid. It was fun."

She seemed to blame the spiraling saga of drug abuse on not only her own exaggerations but the press's credulity; they bought into the stereotype too easily. "That coupled with the fact that I'm black! From the ghetto! On welfare!" she told *Newsday*. "My mother was like, 'Excuse me? I don't think so.' She was, uh-huh, very agitated."

THE NEWEST WHOOPI IS TIMELESS, A WOMAN WITHOUT A PAST. SHE is Fontanne; Langella is Lunt, the silver-haired acting eminence.

"There are certain people you see and say, 'That's where I want to be,'" Whoopi says softly. "I needed somebody who would see what I was capable of and would say, 'Yeah.'"

Her return to the stage is likely a good career move. Although Goldberg has an astonishing talent for making people laugh

"To put yourself in the line of fire is sometimes really great, because it stimulates people," says Whoopi.

(Nichols once called her “part Elaine May, part Groucho, part Ruth Draper”) and considerable skill as an actress, her movies are not blockbusters, usually. *Sister Act* made \$300 million worldwide, but it came out a full four years ago, a long time in the dog-usurp-dog world of Hollywood superstardom. Its sequel, *Sister Act 2*—for which Whoopi received \$8 million, making her at that moment the highest-paid actress in Hollywood ever—tanked.

Whoopi has appeared in nearly 30 movies, the vast majority of them of debatable merit. “I’m tired of movies,” she complains, “because I’m not really sort of doing stuff that my heart is in the way I wanted to be.”

So when her agent, Jeff Hunter—who is also the agent of *Forum*’s current star, Nathan Lane—suggested Whoopi take over the role of Pseudolus, she was feeling ready for a change.

With Langella already in her life, Whoopi has had ample opportunity to soak up the atmosphere of the Broadway stage, from which she has been absent for more than a decade. “When she is not rehearsing her own show,” *Present Laughter*’s Richenthal says, “she is there with Frank, quite literally in his dressing room, and watching his show more than any spouse or significant other that I have ever seen.”

Richenthal adds confidentially, “We keep on reserve a secret seat on the aisle where she can slip back to his dressing room and the public doesn’t even know she’s there.”

WE’RE BACK IN THE HONEYMOON SUITE.

“There was something behind the eyes of the actor on the screen,” Whoopi’s saying. “Something that you knew that, if you were open enough or recognized enough, was very, very lonely.”

Langella’s looking at his lap.

“I felt as a young woman that this was a guy who would appreciate having someone to hang out with and talk to about different stuff. . . .”

Some hard truth seems to occur to her.

“I never thought that this man would even look at me.”

The earlier, unevolved Frank Langella might have overlooked Whoopi, he suggests. Langella is 57. He went through something of a crisis several years back, he says, when he began to lose his youthful good looks. “In my middle forties as I moved toward my fifties, I struggled with it more than I care to remember,” says Langella. “I had a lot of hair—I had *big hair*.”

He smiles. His characterization of *Present Laughter*’s Garry Essendine, who whips around to look at himself in the mirror at least 40 times, is a bit of a self-parody, Langella confesses.

He says his growing awareness of his own superficiality actually helped prepare him for Whoopi: “I wouldn’t have been ready for the profundity of her persona. I wouldn’t have seen it.”

“I wouldn’t have been the open flower I was when I met her.”

Now Whoopi is the one sitting silently in the chair, watching Langella closely.

“One of the early presents Whoopi gave me,” Langella continues in his rich, deep PBS voice, “was a book by Rilke, which I randomly opened to see what I would read and how it would relate to us. It said that the tragedy of people when they fall in love young is that half a person falls in love with half a person.

“Rilke says wait, wait, wait, until you are mature and a whole person falls in love with a whole person.

“It has taken me my entire life”—Langella’s voice wavers on-

ly slightly—“to be ready to meet someone who is as full as I would like to be.”

Whoopi holds her chin up, smiling at him.

ALL THIS LOVE SEEMS TO HAVE SPILLED OVER INTO OTHER PARTS OF Whoopi’s life. Addressing the First Family at the inauguration last month, she said, “*Bill, Hillary, Chelsea, you’re three of the coolest people I know!*”

The surprising thing was how sincere she seemed; she has always made her living by joking about her desire to be included.

Speaking at Radio City last year, where she sang, “Happy Birthday, Mr. President” at Clinton’s fiftieth, Whoopi tossed off this bit of revealing comedy: “I would have worn a blonde wig, but Jack Kemp already has the wig.” The quip includes layers of references, not only to Marilyn Monroe but to Whoopi’s own early incarnations. There was an echo to one of her characters in *Whoopi Goldberg* (or, as it was known before going to Broadway, *The Spook Show*): a little black girl who so desperately wants to have blonde hair that she attaches a yellow skirt to her head.

Whoopi’s favorite joke about her background involves her surname, and she still loves to tell it. “I am a Jewish-American princess,” she told me when I spoke with her. “Actually,” she said, revising on the spot, “I’m a princess, period. There are things that I like done for me, and always did even before I had money. I was *never* into cooking. . . .”

Which is partly why, Whoopi said, she wrote a recipe in 1993 called “Jewish American Princess Fried Chicken” for the *Cooking in Litchfield Hills* cookbook (she owns a house in Litchfield, Connecticut, a town that could not be easily likened to, say, Borough Park). Whoopi’s recipe went like this: “Send chauffeur out to your favorite butcher shop. . . . Have Cook prepare meal while you touch up your makeup. . . .”

The Anti-Defamation League didn’t get the humor. “Maybe the critics are not aware,” her publicist Brad Cafarelli argued at the time, “that Whoopi is Jewish, so she is certainly not anti-Semitic.” Whenever questioned about it, Whoopi has insisted with some irritation, “I’m *Jewish*.”

I asked Cafarelli whether this was true in a technical sense. “Whoopi feels part of many religions,” Cafarelli said on the phone. “She is Catholic and she is Jewish and she . . . is many things.”

WHOOPI IS FINISHING UP HER STORY:

“After we finally met”—“we” is Whoopi and Frank Langella, who is still regarding Whoopi with this unbridled sort of loving amazement—“we went and sat and had dinner at a restaurant, and I said, ‘Can I be your friend?’

“‘I’ll be your friend,’ I said. ‘I’ll be a good friend.’ You know? Because I had waited from when I was 14 until last year to say to him, ‘I’m somebody who you will be all right with. I won’t let anything fuck with you, because I think you’re the greatest, and have always felt that.’

“And I didn’t know why, but I knew it fluidly, I knew it body-fluidly. I knew it heart-wise. I knew that he would be there sometime. . . .

“He hugged me, and it was overwhelming, and I thought, *I can’t explain to you how much I need you in my life.*”

There is a silence.

Langella says: “Whoopi often says we’re like two broken toys trying to mend each other.”

Ten or twelve years ago, says Langella, “I wouldn’t have been ready for the profundity of her persona.”