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Eartha Is Back

By Vashti McKenzie

Going from rags to riches, shadows to spotlight, ghetto to bourgeoisie, basement to penthouse, peanut farm to the presidency and pulpit to Peace Prize is the faint ray of hope that permeates the American dream.

Eatha Kitt knows all about the nothing-to-everything possibilities of the American dream. She also knows what happens when the dream becomes a nightmare.

Kitt was born in North, South Carolina. Her father, a white man, married her mother, a field worker, after she was born.

She was abandoned at nine. A year later, she went to live with an aunt in Harlem. Kitt survived her childhood only to be rejected by her aunt when she was 14. She lived in the homes of friends and in the subways.

She later became a featured singer and dancer with the famed Katherine Dunham Troupe without any dance training. Dunham was obviously impressed with her raw talent.

For five years, 1945-1950, she danced her way out of the shadows of Harlem and into the spotlight. The dream was becoming a reality.

The lithe sensual body and the feline voice that rolls over the English language like melted butter over an ear of hot corn, made a successful Broadway debut at the age of 24. Orson Welles described her as "the most exciting woman in the world." She was a delight to American audiences and the toast of Europe.

Kitt became an entertainer for all seasons. Her talents spanned the spectrum of entertainment . . . Broadway, nightclubs, records, films and television.

Nearly a decade ago, the dream began to fade. The nightmare had its roots in politics and not in the lack of creativity and talent. At a White House luncheon, during the heat of the Vietnam controversy, Kitt confronted the late President Lyndon B. Johnson. Afterwards, it was reported she angered the President greatly. She had the first lady in tears.

Kitt went on an involuntary hiatus from show business in this country. Nightclub dates and a regular role on a television quiz show were cancelled. Her recording sessions also stopped.

Now at the age of 50, she is making a grand re-entry into the entertainment industry starring in the new Broadway musical "Timbuktu!" The fairy tale spectacular opened on Broadway March 1 after trial runs in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C.

"Timbuktu!" also stars Melba Moore, Gilbert Price and introduces Ira Hawkins. Geoffrey Holder, who brought "The Wiz" to life, directed, choreographed and designed the costumes for the million dollar remake of "Kismet."

Before the gates of the fabled African city in the 14th century, Kitt enters triumphantly literally standing on the palms of a muscular nubian guard as Sahleem-La Lume. She is surrounded by a bevy of black beauties, masculine and feminine. They are dressed in yards of flowing colors, beads and loin cloths, leaving little to the imagination.

Kitt descends to the stage via the back of another fine example of black manhood. She scans the territory.

After the elaborate entrance, she announces simply in her exciting voice of soft rolling thunder: "I am here."

The audience breaks up.

"All Timbuktu rejoices at you!" comes the response and you wonder if there are any double meanings here.

The caramel-skinned vision in flowing white robes pauses. She surveys the masculine population. She growls sexily: "Anything new in town?"

Eartha Kitt in Timbuktu, a new musical based on Kismet, directed and choreographed by Geoffrey Holder.

As La Lume, she tantalizes and teases the audience. She woos them with her sensuality and her songs, "In the Beginning Woman" and "Rahadlakum." At the end of the performance, she greets her standing ovation regally like a queen being crowned.

Following a standing-room-only performance at the Kennedy Center in D.C., Kitt paused between the long awaited ovations, accolades and a party at a private club to talk about the dream, the nightmare and the vindication.

Kitt is surrounded by photographs, telegrams, flowers, mineral water, and a humidifier in her dressing room. A gray poodle, Demon, snuggles in the corner underneath her dressing table. July, a gargantuan St. Bernard, lays at her feet.

The years have been kind to her face and figure. A petite woman with a reed thin body, it is hard to believe she ever stood up the President of the United States or survived alone living in the streets of New York.

"I never had any training until I went as a joke to audition for Katherine Dunham" Kitt purred. "I won a full scholarship. Others had to pay her for lessons. She paid me."

She remembers dancing in a show "Blue Holiday" and partying in the streets of New York all night long on D Day, near the end of World War II. After five years, the novice singer-dancer left the troupe to exercise her new talents in her first club act.

"The day I went into rehearsal, I had no money," she said. "I borrowed money from the club manager to buy white silk material for my costume. I made it myself in a sarong style."

Today, young performers do not have the extensive network of clubs in which to develop their talents.

"Maybe that is why we were so lucky, way back then," she said. "We came in towards the end of vaudeville. There were five and six shows a day, $35 a week.

"I was living on $10 a week. I paid $5 for rent and had $5 for transportation and eating. And we enjoyed it."

Kitt laughs. Some young performers who earn $300 to $400 per week complain.

"Generally speaking, they have no endurance," she said smiling. "The easiest thing to

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