



## ESSENCE 2007 HOLLYWOOD PORTFOLIO

Let's be clear: We own Hollywood. We are dream girls, kings and fearless assassins. We're brokering deals, distributing films and writing scripts—all on our own terms. In this portfolio, we honor the all-stars. Golden girl Jennifer Hudson and towering thespian Forest Whitaker continue racking up accolades for their phenomenal roles. Jenifer Lewis stakes her claim as the ultimate diva. Academy Award winner Jamie Foxx scores with his latest blockbusters. Director, writer and actor, Tyler Perry opens a studio in his beloved Atlanta. Thandie Newton shows her range in roles that go from heartbreaking to hilarious. Rob Brown and Jamie Hector prove the night is young on their careers. Grammy winner Alicia Keys adds actress to her career list. And the shot callers—agent Charles King, super CEO Magic Johnson, producer Suzanne de Passe, visionary Quincy Jones, screenwriter Gina Prince-Bythewood and director Kasi Lemmons—ensure our stars have more roles, more movies, more magic. —CORI MURRAY

# SOMETHING LIKE A *Phenomenon*

Nailing the role of a lifetime in *Dreamgirls* has brought standing ovations from San Francisco to Savannah to this sister from the South Side of Chicago. Now, with a slew of awards headed her way and a debut album in the works, she has a bit of advice for those trying to steal her shine >

BY DENENE MILLNER PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEN PRINCE

STYLING BY AGNES CAMMOCK

Shining Star: Jennifer wears an **OMO Norma Kamali** gown, **Jimmy Choo** shoes, **Kwiat Star** chandelier earrings and a **Cartier** ring.

Jennifer Hudson was photographed January 4, 2007, at the Beekman Tower Hotel in New York.

ON HIM: KENNETH COLE NEW YORK SUIT AND SHIRT.



No matter how glitzy and glamorous the red carpet looks on camera, in person it's an absolutely unnatural scene. On New York's Forty-Seventh Street, just steps from the circus that is Times Square, paparazzi cordoned off by rows of cold steel barriers clutch their fancy digital cameras and try desperately to look nonchalant as they peer into the long line of limos snaking their way up to the city's famed Supper Club, where the New York Film Critics Circle (NYFCC) is holding its annual awards. And then Jennifer Hudson, still riding high after her film debut as the boisterous, no-nonsense Effie White in the runaway hit movie *Dreamgirls*, arrives. She steps one metallic-silver pedicured foot onto the sidewalk, and all hell breaks loose. There's the rustling commotion of the security guards and celebrity wranglers as bystanders thrust bits of paper in her direction, begging for a scribble; and the pop, pop, popping of camera flashes; and the yelling, oh, the yelling: "Jennifer! Ms. Hudson! Look over your shoulder!

and bounces on to the next microphone, the reporter she's just finished with raises a fist in the air in salute to the sister, cheering her on and quietly telling another reporter, "I hope she wins an Oscar; she's just incredible. She deserves it."

Everyone wants Hudson to win. "Very simply, she's the closest thing we have to an absolute instant success," explains Gene Seymour, a film critic who was on hand at the NYFCC ceremony to watch Hudson collect the prestigious group's Best Supporting Actress award. It was the first of a staggering number of nominations that have turned into bona fide awards for the actress. (At press time, she'd also received a Best Supporting Actress nomination from the Screen Actors Guild.) "There isn't anybody I've talked to—and these are people who have very high standards—who is not into this woman," Seymour says. "They not only appreciate her obvious talent but how she's carrying herself. She's fulfilled the archetype of the instant success, but she's actually behaving like a longtime success. That really enhances her standing."

Yet to Hudson, being the starry-eyed newcomer everybody's rooting for is quite surreal. She is, after all, just a 25-year-old girl from the South Side of Chicago who, at this time last year, didn't have her eyes on any prize. "I was thinking, *Man, I don't*

grandma. Her first solo was in the church and came only after considerable pleading with the choir director, pastor and organist. But when she got her big chance to sing "Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone?" she forgot the words. Besides *Dreamgirls*, her résumé boasts only three other steady singing engagements: one as a soloist in a local production of *Big River*, one as a singer on a Disney cruise ship and one on the drive-through mic at Burger King. Until now, she was most famous as the big-haired, big-voiced girl whose rendition of Barry Manilow's "Weekend in New England" got her bootied off *American Idol*, with Simon Cowell snarling, "You get one shot. . . you ain't never gonna be seen again."

Not so much, Simon. Hudson knew she was destined to be a star. "The show couldn't take away my talent," shrugs Hudson as she curls up in a chair in her Four Seasons suite in

standing on those tour stages, Hudson constantly reminded herself to savor every second. "I'd say, 'Lord, if I don't get another chance, thank you for this—at least I got to taste it.' "

Clearly the Lord had other things in mind, and apparently so did anyone who was remotely connected to various *Dreamgirls* projects that had been bubbling on stages all across the country. "Everybody in the world thought I should be Effie," Hudson recalls. She had gotten four offers to play Effie from small production houses before the big call from a casting agency came in on her mama's phone. Paramount Films, under the direction of Bill Condon, the man who helped make Queen Latifah a big-screen star when she played Mama in his Oscar-winning film version of *Chicago*, wanted Hudson to read for Effie in his new *Dreamgirls* production. Six months worth of "You're the one that we want/we changed our minds/you're

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This way! Look *this* way!" Within seconds the scene takes on the atmosphere of, say, the Second Coming.

Hudson, dressed in a black silk Issa goddess gown that hugs her curves, her cascade of softly curled hair framing her flawless complexion, sparkling eyes and lush, full lips, cuts a striking pose in that sea of flashing lights, her megawatt smile as easy and effortless as that of any seasoned celebrity. Once inside, the Golden Globe winner for Best Actress in a Supporting Role—and odds-on favorite for the Best Supporting Actress Academy Award nomination—runs the gauntlet of press, from VH1, the BBC and Reelz Channel Network to CNBC's *Suze Orman Show*. She answers the reporters' questions, even the obvious ones—"So is this a *total* dream come true for you?"—with grace and her I'm-such-a-regular-girl candor. As Hudson smiles

want [*Dreamgirls* director Bill Condon] to be like, 'God, why did we hire this girl? What was I thinking?' " Hudson says with a laugh, remembering the beginning of her road to superstardom and, quite possibly, the Oscars stage. "Until the announcements started coming in, I had no idea. This is something I totally did not expect, never once plotted or planned for. I didn't see it coming—God kept this a secret from me."

#### AMERICAN DREAM

By now, the girl who affectionately signs off her blog and MySpace page with JHud is no secret; her meteoric rise has made her life an open book: Hudson is the baby in a family of full and half siblings. She has wanted to be a professional singer since she was 7 years old, growing up at the knee of her gospel-singing

Manhattan, hours before the NYFCC awards, tucking her sock-covered feet under her legs. "I knew I'd have to sing my way to it, but I knew I still had my talent. On *American Idol*, you go through this mental thing; you've got to get yourself back together. You've been abused, misled and brainwashed to believe whatever they want you to think. You become a character—I became the girl in the turkey wrapping," she says, referring to the unfortunate outfit that earned her that label. "I just knew I had to sing my way out of it. I don't believe in looking back, and I didn't look back."

Instead, Hudson traveled with her fellow alums on the *American Idols* tour—"Without a song to my name!" she notes, laughing. She sang a little bit of Aretha, Prince and even *Dreamgirls* castmate Beyoncé's "Dangerously in Love." While

perfect/you're not gonna work" came down, literally, to Hudson tearing up a performance of "And I'm Telling You (I'm Not Going)" for the final screen test.

You know what happened next. Those producers reacted the same way we did when we shelled out our dollars and sat in that movie theater, full from Christmas dinner, and waited, breathlessly, for Hudson to give it to us like all the critics said she would. Her raw energy and heartache were so incredibly fierce she attacked every note as if she were going to claw clean through the screen. *Tear down the mountains.../push, strike, and kill/I'm not gonna leave ya/there's no way I will!* She had us all crying and jumping to our feet and wanting to reach in and slap the mess out of that damn Curtis for doing Effie dirty.

HAIR: KIVAH WRIGHT; MAKEUP: TIADANTZLER.COM; DRESS: ONO; NECKLACE: IRADJIVONI



Hudson's mom, Darnell, says it was her mother, Julia Kate Hudson, who taught Jennifer how to attack a song like that. Ironically, Darnell notes, Jennifer was born with underdeveloped lungs that, in her first months of life, made her crying sound like "this little, funny high-pitched" noise. But there's nothing wrong with those lungs now. "Jennifer has that dynamic voice, just like my mother," says Darnell. "She always seemed to know how to put emphasis in certain places. When my mother sang, you could feel her, and Jennifer has that same quality."

You won't find many people who will disagree with Hudson's mom on that one, music legend Clive Davis included. "I was totally knocked out," says Davis, who, after seeing Hudson's screen test, summoned the young singer to his office and offered her a recording contract on his J Records label, home of R&B/pop legend Whitney Houston and soul artist Alicia Keys. "I don't know what her frame of reference was; it's not an easy song to sing, and it was done very strongly in the original by Jennifer Holliday. From the screen test you could see that she understood it, that she felt it. The range in vocal dynamic and ability was startling."

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## JENNIFER VS. EFFIE

Hudson owns the movie because she credibly conveyed Effie's determination, desolation and triumphant comeback in a way that makes it hard for die-hard *Dreamgirls* fans to separate the character from the actress who played it.

Take note: This is exactly how it went down for Holliday, who, alongside Sheryl Lee Ralph (as Deena Jones) and Loretta Devine (as Lorrell Robinson), originated the Effie role in the smash Broadway play in 1981. Holliday packed 'em in with her powerful pipes, winning both a Tony and a Grammy award for her effort. She went on to build a 25-year career off "And I'm Telling You," performing it in seemingly every corner of the earth—most recently, last summer in Las Vegas.

As Hudson started taking her *Dreamgirls* bow, Holliday let it be known on a national radio show that she felt as if the folks behind the movie were trying to "force me into retirement." "I'm not a millionaire, and I don't have any kind of precious possessions, no children," Holliday told shock jock Wendy Williams on her New York City-based radio show the same day the movie premiered in Manhattan. "This legacy, 'And I Am Telling You (I'm Not Going),' is the only thing I do have. And I do need to work. It's all right if they have a movie with someone else who's singing it, who is wonderful. [But] can't both of us be wonderful? My thing is, please don't try to kick me to the curb."

"I'm not trying to be jealous. I'm trying to be on a survival tip here," Holliday continued on *The Wendy Williams Experience*. "This is not about hating. God made the world big enough for

both people to work. One doesn't have to be unblessed for the other to be blessed. Give a dreamgirl a break; I did give the girl an opportunity to do this.... I created the role. No one gave me the role; I created the role."

JHud's response: "First off," Hudson says, her bubbly tone taking a neck-swirling turn, "don't let that be the only song you're performing. Pursue other things and don't just limit yourself to that. I don't intend to say, 'Okay, I'm going to sing this song for the rest of my life, and this will be the only character that I portrayed.' I'm Jennifer, not Effie. I'm flexible and different and have other dreams and other goals and songs to pursue."

Of course, this will be a much easier proposition under the tutelage of Davis, who won Hudson to his camp over a number of other music managers who tried to woo her to their labels. Hudson refused to confirm whether one of the managers she was approached by, and ultimately turned down, was Beyoncé's daddy, Matthew Knowles. The gossip wags claimed that Hudson's alleged refusal of Knowles, and the accolades she's received for her performance, caused tension between her and Beyoncé. Hudson insists there's no drama. "We clicked from day one," says Hudson, who remembers the *Dreamgirls* trio getting

a kick out of the fact that they're all Virgos, and all have the same mole in the same exact spot on the left side of their necks. "It's amazing to me that God took three different women from three different walks of life and created the *Dreamgirls*. We were meant to be together. When you look at us, you see it's all connected. I'm loving Beyoncé."

Davis says he and his A&R staff are currently talking to "some of the best songwriters in the world" about the right material for Hudson's debut album—a nugget of 411 that, when told to her, makes Hudson break out into a grin. Still, she's not quite sure what kind of album she'll be reaching for; there are so many options. She can, after all, soar like Cissy Houston, dig deep like Aretha, sugar it up like Celine Dion, and even make it "uh, oh, uh, oh" like B. But for today, she's just living for each moment, enjoying the here and the right now, and all of its possibilities.

"Jesus, I got to say it again: It just feels like God's favor," Hudson says as she considers all that awaits her. "I really have no words. I just appreciate that people even think I'm worthy of something like this. It's an honor, and I'm just happy to be here, to be a part of it, to have been in the movie. Just to get the part was the reward for me. And this—this awards season—is the golden icing on the cake." □

**Denene Millner is an ESSENCE contributing writer.**

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Star Light in White: Jennifer wears an **OMO Norma Kamali** gown and **Jimmy Choo** shoes.

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