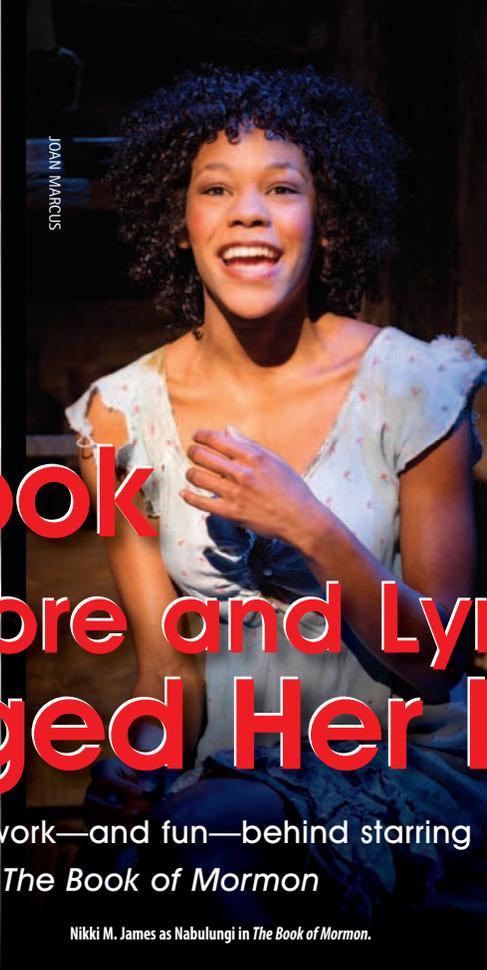


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SHEVETT STUDIOS



This Book (and Score and Lyrics) Changed Her Life

Nikki M. James on the work—and fun—behind starring Broadway’s monster hit *The Book of Mormon*

A daughter of immigrants, James was raised on the belief that hard work could achieve dreams.

Nikki M. James as Nabalungi in *The Book of Mormon*.

When she won the Tony James didn’t have a statement prepared, but still delivered a moving speech “straight from the heart.”

Americans love pulling for the underdog—unless it’s a star-studded category in one of the most anticipated Tony Awards ever. Then the newcomer might truly feel grateful just to be nominated and invited to the event. That was the feeling of Tony nominee Nikki M. James, until she conquered theatre giants to take the 2011 Tony Award for Best Actress in a Featured Role in a Musical for her work as Nabalungi in *The Book of Mormon*.

Don’t Tell Her Not to Fly, She’s Simply Got To

Nikki M. James’ life story, thus far, reads like the lyrics of Jule Styne’s famous showstopper “Don’t Rain on My Parade.” The daughter of immigrant parents from the Caribbean, James readily admits, “My life is, for sure, the American dream.” And don’t bother telling James, she “can’t” do something she sets out to do. The word is not in her lexicon.

Her mother came from Haiti as a teenager and her father emigrated from St. Vincent. As fate would have it, they met in Queens in the 1970s, fell in love and started a family in the suburbs. According to James, her parents told them anything is possible if they were willing to work for it. “They told

their kids they can be and do whatever they want

to do. They raised their children to believe in the American dream.” Her father, Popi, was her biggest fan until he passed away when she was in high school, but she knows he still watches over her as she conquers Broadway.

When James won her Tony at the 65th Annual Tony Awards on June 12, 2011, the sheer shock was evident on her face. She even jokes that she had not written an acceptance speech because she was sure she would not win.

Her category included theatre goddesses such as Tony Award-winners Patti LuPone, Laura Benanti and Victoria Clark, plus Emmy Award winner Tammy Blanchard. James considered herself the underdog because she was the only one in her category who had not won a major award. Going in to the Tonys, “I was seriously the new kid on the block and I didn’t know what to expect. And I didn’t win the two bigger awards leading up to the Tonys, which are the Drama Desk and the Outer Critics.” Both of those went to Benanti for *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*. “I went to the Tonys thinking this is an amazing experience, it’s amazing to be nominated. I’m doing work I’m proud of in a show that I love.”

When film-turned-Broadway star Daniel Radcliffe read the name on the card announcing James as the winner, she could not believe her ears. “I was literally, completely floored. I’m a pretty good actress, I think, but no one’s that good,” she laughs.

Decked out in a gorgeous red dress and crying genuine tears of gratitude, James gave a heartfelt speech that touched everyone. She thanked her Popi for inspiring her to follow her dreams without reservation. She recounted the story of the bumblebee and how physicists have not officially devised a mathematical equation to explain how bumblebees fly, since

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For more stories from Nikki about her “Cinderella” Tony night, head on over to www.stage-directions.com/nikkim-james





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When studying vocal technique James paid close attention to her body, taking time to learn what her body needed to keep it in peak condition.

their wings are theoretically too small to lift the bee's body mass. As the story goes, bumblebees fly because "firstly, nobody told them they can't and then sheer will and determination," says James.

In her speech, she also mentioned Ozzie, her nephew who is named after her father and continues to inspire her on a daily basis. James describes little Ozzie's first few months of life. "My nephew was born in October 2009 with some pretty serious kidney issues. So the beginning of his life was fraught with a lot of complications, he spent a lot of time in the hospital the first couple of months." The doctors' prognosis was bleak. "That was a really difficult time in my life."

Already blazing a hot career path, James was scheduled to perform with theatre and film legend Christopher Plummer in a production at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival. The gig required a year-long stint in Canada, keeping her from her family during that very difficult time. "I decided to stay home. I wanted to be around for my family," she remembers. "It was the first time in my life that something became more important to me than my career. I found something else in my life that took precedence. It wasn't even really that difficult a decision."

Her family remembered the story of the bumblebee defying the odds. "We started calling him our 'Bumblebee,' and then we all became his hive. That's where that story comes from in my life." And on achieving the quasi-impossible at the 65th Annual Tony Awards, James says, "It's been a theme in my life for the past couple of years. And when I got up and won that Tony Award, I was so overcome, that's where that comes from. I hope it didn't sound kitschy or planned because it really came straight from my heart."

Brown Disney Princess

Having interviewed James twice before— on my radio show, Musical Theatre Talk and again at the Tonys' "Meet the Nominees" press reception—non-traditional casting was a choice topic for discussion. In the Tonys' media room on the big night, I waved my hand to be recognized to ask James one question: "Do you think Broadway has broken through to colorblind casting?" As soon as the question was uttered, every head in the room turned and stared at me. But James wonderfully addressed the issue, saying, "Yes, I felt like a brown Disney Princess. And I'm so glad Matt and Trey set *The Book of Mormon* in Uganda when they could have set it anywhere."

Talking with her again, she elaborated on the literal interpretation of "colorblind" casting and that a quality that makes one artist "different" from another should not be considered a bad thing. James explains, "This is something we should acknowledge and celebrate and then forget about. There's no such thing as colorblind. And there shouldn't be. We shouldn't all try to be mashed together to be one big color of gray. Everybody has a unique experience that they can bring to the table."

"I think the problem is that we decide what it means. I'm a child of two immigrants. My Haitian culture and my Vincentian culture is just as important to me as being

an African-American and being an American and being a woman. Every single one of us is totally unique.

"My only issue with the idea of non-traditional casting is that directors should feel free to do what they want. No one should feel pressured," she feels, to cast for or against a "type." James relates her own experience growing up playing all sorts of roles in school productions that broke "type," including "Dolly Levi" in *Hello, Dolly!*, one of the orphans in *Annie*, a von Trapp kid in *The Sound of Music*, Ursula in *Bye-Bye Birdie* and even a pants-role as Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*.

"Nobody ever said, 'Nikki can't play Scrooge because she's a girl.' Well, I couldn't play a 70-year old man to begin with. None of us could. We just did it because we loved it. And it doesn't get in the way of storytelling if your goal is to be telling a story and transporting an audience."

Transitioning to the big leagues brought her face-to-face with the reality of the business, however. "It was a rude awakening when I got to the professional world and I realized I shouldn't show up to the audition for 'XYZ Piece,'" she confesses. "I had role models like Audra McDonald, so I didn't see the world as limiting as other people do."

"I think there are a lot of kids like me and the world is going to change. But the truth is people should be taking risks and be doing art that they're proud of—as long as what you're doing is something you're proud of and expressing a gift you've been given. We've all been given a gift and our only responsibility is to share it with the world."

Sharing a vision can conflict with preconceived notions of what people expect to see. "It gets difficult at times. As artists, we're supposed to be ahead of the curve. But our country hasn't figured it out; our world hasn't figured it out. And it's a conversation we'll have for the next 50 years and it's a good conversation to have."

The business, however, still has some room for improvement. "I think the problem is that everybody would like to pretend that it's not happening. But it's an important part of our craft to push boundaries."

Life Upon the Wicked (But Saved) Stage

Performing a major role in a Broadway show eight times per week can wear down the body and the voice. Performing in a box office bonanza like *The Book of Mormon* has the added pressure of interviews and appearances outside of the regular gig to soothe the savage fans who want more and more of Broadway's reigning tour-de-farce.

Maintaining a magical voice does not happen by magic. James attributes her healthy singing chops to working with Broadway vocal coach-extraordinaire, Liz Caplan. "Firstly, I know that it's a work in progress, so I work at it," James admits, adding, "I make sure I warm up before every show." She even shares a quick story about doing a performance recently without warming up and paying the price. "Oh, I'll never do that again. Never, never, never!"

Her eating and hydration regimen is as important as any scale or vocalise. "I try to eat healthily and be conscious of what I'm putting in my body, before the show, after the show and in my regular life." Like many singers, James shies away from dairy, but also steers clear of gluten foods most of the time. She makes sure to keep her protein intake up and does not drink alcohol. In fact, her favorite beverage comes not from grapes but from a hairy palm fruit. "I drink a ton of coconut water!" James exclaims. "It's my new addiction. I live for it."

She lists several other great tips for keeping the vocal folds in optimal singing condition. "I steam my voice before the show and after for a few minutes. But the number one thing I do is resting. I don't do a lot of socializing outside of work. I sleep a lot. It's pretty much the only way your body can recover is when you're in REM sleep. So getting enough sleep is important." And of course, she does not smoke cigarettes.

Sounding like a voice teacher's dream student, James swears she's not perfect but does try her best to reward her voice with care and attention which makes her job easier. "I feel good when I can walk out on the stage and not have to worry about my voice. Then I can just be an actor who's not a technician who has to navigate all these things. That's important to me."

Being a part of the phenomenon of *The Book of Mormon*, James recognizes what a gift she has been given. "I want to make sure I'm taking advantage of this opportunity I've been given to tell this story to these audiences eight times per week. I want to be here. In order for me to do this show eight times per week, that's what I have to do. Other people can behave totally differently and have totally different instruments."

Serious voice students do learn life lessons over the course of their voice lessons, and James was no different. "Coming to terms with my voice was the same as coming to terms with my body as I was growing older. It was a difficult task. It was a push-pull—I wanted to go out and party, but I just can't do it, so I don't. I know when I have to say 'no.'" James wants to be able to give as much back to the audience as they give her and the cast at each show.

Backstage Poets' Society

The Book of Mormon's onstage shenanigans just might pale in comparison to the impromptu performances and frat boy antics backstage. Each cast member has an individual ritual to get ready for the show, but the cast as a whole comes together to share in the fun before the curtain rises.

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Nikki and the cast have a host of rituals that carry the comedy backstage, too.

James describes the nightly literary opining of Tony nominee Josh Gad, who plays "Elder Cunningham." She says, "Josh does an impression of Maya Angelou, but he calls her 'Myra Angelou.' He does a weird rap, some off-the-cuff poem" that cracks up the entire cast. But the Mormon boys in the ensemble have their own handshake, a myriad of gesticulations that keeps growing and growing as the show's run progresses.

During intermission, the cast holds their "Vestibule Cabaret" featuring ensemble member Maia Nkenge Wilson who takes song requests and sings a song—but she has no idea what the lyrics are, so she makes them up as she goes along. And the most anticipated backstage ritual might be the Dollar Jackpot that involves all interested parties investing a dollar with his or her name on it and whosever dollar is pulled out, gets the pot. "Which is today," James remembers, "It's so exciting! I've got to get my dollar in."

The Broadway theatre community is known to be a small, tight-knit group and James reiterates that. "That's one of the best things about being in this community. We have a lot of fun."

If the producers ever do a fundraiser, they could probably sell tickets to the backstage pre-show for \$800 each.

May I Share the Good News With You?

Though James has a couple of secret projects in the works, she proudly announces that she is collecting Twitter followers. "And I'm trying not to disappoint. My twitter is @NikkiMJames. So please follow me!" Her Facebook page is also growing and she can be found as "Nikki M. James."

James loves her fans and the *Book of Mormon* audiences, but the two people closest to her will always be her Popi and Ozzie. She keeps pictures of them in a locket she wears close to her heart. And though winning the Tony was a thrill of a lifetime, it cannot compare to the encouraging news her family received recently at one of Ozzie's check-ups. "He is healthy enough now to receive a transplanted kidney that will help him thrive and grow and live a long life."

James marvels at his ability to enjoy the moment, "When you see a little kid like my nephew, this magical being, who has had such a tough life and see how much joy he has and his ability to play and have fun, it's really inspiring... I dedicate my performances to both my Popi and Ozzie. They're my angels." 