

Hunter Grad Hits High Note as Broadway Leading Lady



Hunter alumna Jeannette Bayardelle (BS '02) has become a big star on Broadway — belting out songs on stage as the leading lady in the hit musical *The Color Purple*.

That surprises many who knew the Bronx-born and raised Bayardelle back in her days at Hunter as a hard-working, dedicated medical laboratory sciences student.

But the actress/singer says the years she spent studying science at Hunter were a wonderful experience that helped her advance in her show business career.

“My father is a doctor,” she explains. “My sister is a pediatrician. My other sister is a registered nurse. Going to school was very important in my house. My parents were very supportive of my performing career. But they wanted to make sure I had a good education and something to fall back on.”

Bayardelle took over as the star of Oprah Winfrey’s production of *The Color Purple* at the Broadway Theatre last November. She had understudied that role and the parts of 10 other actors since the show began its run on Broadway in late 2005. She moved into the role of Celie, a woman who triumphs over adversity, when leading lady LaChanze — who won a Tony — left the show. In February, Bayardelle left the Broadway cast of *The Color Purple* to join the national touring version of the show — which opens in Chicago this spring.

While at Hunter, Bayardelle was so committed to her studies that she didn’t perform, except for singing at church on Sundays. “No one at Hunter knew,” she says of her show business aspirations. “I didn’t really talk about my other performing life.”

But soon after graduation her career skyrocketed. She landed a starring role off-Broadway and signed a contract as an R&B singing artist. Since then, in addition to performing in *The Color Purple*, Bayardelle has gone on tours of *Sister Act*, *Big River*, and *Rent* — and she released her own CD of gospel music titled “Praise Report.”



Oprah Winfrey, who brought *The Color Purple* to Broadway, with Jeannette Bayardelle.

She also praised the staff and faculty, including program director Regina Linder. Bayardelle says Linder encouraged her to get As and B’s at Hunter, telling her, “I don’t want you to be average.” Linder admits now that she was thrilled and surprised when she first heard about her former student’s show business success. “I went to see the show. I was amazed to see Jeannette command the stage in a role that reflected the calm young lab student I remember.”

Bayardelle graduated from Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts.

Looking to the future, Bayardelle — who still sings in church every Sunday — says that what she really wants to do most in the future is become a “full-time gospel singer...a full-time minister” for God. “This is my calling,” she says of her gospel singing. “God has blessed me with this gift and I want to use it to serve Him and help bring people closer to Him.”

With all of her success in show business, Bayardelle was asked if she had any advice for current students at Hunter who hoped someday to follow in her footsteps. “Pray to God and make sure it’s what He wants you to do,” she says. “Then don’t let no’ stop you. Persist and persist.”

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— Jeannette Bayardelle