

Jenifer Lewis

Dubbed a National Treasure and a force to be reckoned with, multi-award-winning actress **Jenifer Lewis** starred on ABC's *Black-ish* for eight seasons as the hilarious grandmother *Ruby Johnson*. Ms. Lewis has appeared in over 400 episodic television shows, 68 movies, 40 animations, and 4 Broadway shows. Credits include: *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Friends*, *A Different World*, *Twenties*, *Castaway*, *What's Love Got to Do with It*, *Think Like a Man*, *Madea's Family Reunion*, *Strong Medicine*, *The Princess and the Frog*, *Mickey Mouse Funhouse*, *Rugrats*, *Cars I, II and III*, *American Dad*, and *Hairspray*.

Ms. Lewis has performed in more than 200 concerts worldwide including sold out shows at Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall. Her accomplishments as an entertainer, community activist and author have been recognized with an honorary doctorate from her Alma Mater, Webster University and the Career Achievement Award from The American Black Film Festival.

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Jenifer Jeanette Lewis was born on January 25, 1957 in Kinloch, Missouri, to a nurse's aide mother, Dorothy, and a factory worker father and is the youngest of seven children. She began singing in her church choir at the age of five. She attended Kinloch High School and then college at Webster University in Webster Groves, Missouri. She received an honorary degree from Webster in 2015. After college, Lewis moved to New York to focus on her career in performing.

Soon after she arrived in New York City, Lewis debuted on Broadway in a small role in *Eubie* (1979), the musical based on the work of Eubie Blake. She next landed the role of Effie White in the workshop of the Michael Bennett-directed musical *Dreamgirls*, but when the show moved to Broadway, Bennett chose Jennifer Holliday for the role.

Lewis later accepted a position as a *Harlette*, a back-up singer for Bette Midler which led to Lewis' first TV appearances on Midler's HBO specials. She acquired her first screen role as a result, appearing as a singer in the Bette Midler vehicle *Beaches* (1988). At the same time, Lewis was developing her nightclub act, *The Diva Is Dismissed*, an autobiographical comedy and music show in New York City cabarets. She performed the show off-Broadway at the Public Theater.

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After Lewis relocated to Los Angeles, she began appearing in television sitcoms, including *Murphy Brown*, *Dream On*, *In Living Color*, *Roc*, *Hangin' with Mr. Cooper* and *Friends*.

From 1992 to 1993, she played Dean Davenport in the sixth and final season of the NBC sitcom *A Different World*. She also had a recurring role as Will Smith's Aunt Helen in the NBC sitcom *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* from 1991 to 1996. As regular, Lewis starred alongside Patricia Wettig in her short-lived legal drama *Courthouse* in 1995, playing Judge Rosetta Reide, the first main African American lesbian character on television.

In 1992, Lewis was cast as one of the back-up singers to Whoopi Goldberg in the comedy film *Sister Act*. The following year, Lewis played the mother of Tupac Shakur's character in the film *Poetic Justice*, and as Zelma Bullock, Tina Turner's mother, in the biopic *What's Love Got to Do With It* starring Angela Bassett. For her performance, she received her first NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Motion Picture nomination.

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In 1994, she followed with other comedic supporting roles, including Mrs. Coleman the Unemployment Office lady in *Renaissance Man* and as Whoopi Goldberg's sister in *Corrina, Corrina*. In 1995, she was cast in maternal roles to Kadeem Hardison in *Panther* and to Larenz Tate in *Dead Presidents*.

In 1996, Lewis appeared as Theresa Randle's telephone sex line boss in the film *Girl 6*. Later that year, she played Whitney Houston's character's mother in the film *The Preacher's Wife*. She received another NAACP Image Award nomination for her role in *The Preacher's Wife*. She also has had roles in *The Mighty* (1998), *The Temptations* miniseries (1998), *Mystery Men* (1999) and *Blast from the Past* (1999), before obtaining the leading role in the film *Jackie's Back* (1999).

In 2000, Lewis had a supporting role in the adventure drama film *Cast Away* directed by Robert Zemeckis. Also in 2000, she began starring as Lana Hawkins on the Lifetime television medical drama *Strong Medicine*, which ran for six-seasons. Lewis also performed the theme song for *Strong Medicine*. She also had a recurring role as Veretta Childs (Toni's mother) in the UPN sitcom *Girlfriends*, and was the voice of Flo in the Disney Pixar *Cars* movies.

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In film, she appeared as Morris Chestnut's mother in the romantic comedy *The Brothers* (2001). In 2006, she had a featured role as the wedding planner in Tyler Perry's *Madea's Family Reunion*, and also appeared in Perry's comedy-drama *Meet the Browns* (2008) as Vera Brown. She also appeared in *Juwanna Mann* (2002), *The Cookout* (2004), *Nora's Hair Salon* (2004), *Dirty Laundry* (2006) and *Not Easily Broken* (2009).

In 2008, Lewis replaced Darlene Love as Motormouth Maybelle in Broadway's *Hairspray* and guest starred on *That's So Raven* and *Boston Legal*. Lewis also had a number of voice acting roles, including Walt Disney Studios animated musical *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), for which she was nominated for the Annie Award for Voice Acting in a Feature Production.

In June 2010, Lewis' told The Jazz Joy and Roy syndicated radio show: "I just did a production of 'Hello Dolly' at the 5th Avenue Theatre in Seattle and it had to be one of the greatest productions that I have ever done, because I got to just do a character, Dolly Levi, and it was just great."

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In 2012 Lewis began working with Shangela on the online reality show parody, "Jenifer Lewis and Shangela," where she plays herself alongside Shangela, a "drag queen living in her basement." She later appeared in Shangela's music video for "Werqin Girl (Professional)."

In 2010, Clint Eastwood cast Lewis in his fantasy film *Hereafter*. The following year, she starred alongside Rosario Dawson and Tracee Ellis Ross in *Five*, for which she received another NAACP Image Award nomination. She also co-starred in the short-lived NBC series, *The Playboy Club*.

Lewis played Terrence J's overbearing mother in box-office hit *Think Like a Man* (2012), and in its sequel *Think Like a Man Too* (2014). In 2013, she played Paula Patton's mother in the romantic comedy *Baggage Claim*. In 2015, she starred in the romantic comedy *The Wedding Ringer*.

In 2014, Lewis was cast as Ruby Johnson, Anthony Anderson's character's mother in the ABC comedy series *Black-ish*. For her performance, she received nominations from the Television Critics Choice Awards, The NAACP Image Awards and The Satellite Awards as Best Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series.

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Her autobiography, *The Mother of Black Hollywood*, became a chart-topping, national best seller in 2017, and her follow-up book, *Walking in My Joy: In These Streets*, is set for an end of summer 2022 release.

Currently, Ms. Lewis is starring in the new hit series, *I Love That for You* on Showtime.

In April, The International Press Academy presented her with the 2022 *Honorary Satellite Award* for her career contributions to the entertainment industry and for her various charitable endeavors including: The Human Rights Campaign, The Los Angeles LGBT Center, The Coalition for At-Risk Youth, The Urban League, The EWOC Foundation: Exceptional Women of Color and Broadway Cares / Equity Fights AIDS.

Ms. Lewis is also a longtime outspoken advocate on issues concerning the LGBT community, climate change, voting rights, and mental health awareness.

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06/22

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