

# ABFF INSIDER

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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

*GREENLEAF's*  
Fearless and Fabulous

**MERLE  
DANDRIDGE**

Beautiful star of the stage and screen

May 2017 • Issue II



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# Feature Story

ABFF INSIDER Know More.



PHOTO CREDITS:  
COVER PHOTO: CINDY JOHNSON AND FEATURE STORY PHOTO: THEO JULIET

## Meet Merle Dandridge

Last April, OWN introduced the Greenleaf family to viewers in a big way. Since the very first episode, we knew that grand mansion held secrets, issues, lies and love—and America has been tuned in to every episode in record numbers right from the start. Get to know more about Merle Dandridge and her character—the gifted, zealous and sexy Grace Greenleaf.

**Grace Greenleaf is not who people generally picture when thinking of pastors. Did you work with the writers to mold this character?**

One of my favorite things about the medium of television is the creative journey we get to go on together. Grace was already a rich and complex character when I encountered her. I'm very blessed to have producers and writers who are also interested in what I can bring to the role. They're also wonderfully collaborative and interested in any ideas I might have. It's very satisfying work.

**Has the black church community had any reactions to Grace's character, particularly since she doesn't look or act like the typical pastor?**

I try not to let opinions outside of my work circle influence my process. I just try to dig for what feels true, honest and authentic. That being said, I haven't heard any negativity about Grace's pastoring or lack thereof. What I DO hear is a great connection to her humanity. Just because

she's in the pulpit doesn't mean she doesn't wrestle with the same struggles any other person would.

**Although actors typically try not to judge their characters, do you ever find yourself judging Grace just a little bit on occasion?**

As the person portraying her, I have to have the most empathy for her. I should be in her corner the most! However!!! Grace has me biting my nails sometimes!

**Grace has complicated interactions with everyone—her daughter, her parents, her love interests, even some of the parishioners. Will we ever see her in a successful relationship?**

I genuinely hope so. Darius Nash, played by Rick Fox, has done a great job of drawing Grace out, letting her have a little fun and face some parts of her past that she hasn't shared with anyone else. I believe this is one piece of the gateway that will help her transition into a healthy, happier time in her life.

**The GREENLEAF mid-season finale had some very aggressive moments. Did your yoga and capoeira training during your time playing the role of Kala in Tarzan on Broadway help with the physicality of that last scene where you fight with Uncle Mac?**

Greg Alan and I have both had training in stage combat, though it had been years for me. I also trust and respect him implicitly as a friend and an artist. We had a ball. But boy, did we sleep well that night!!

**Your audience may not know how well you can sing but the ABFF INSIDER knows all! Any chance we'll get to hear your lovely voice on GREENLEAF, perhaps a duet with Charity?**

Never count that out! Most pastoring families I know have music all over the home. Worship, jamming, harmonizing...it's part of it. As an off-screen family we are like that, as you may have seen

in our FB lives and IG posts. The Greenleaf kids grew up praising together. I would not be surprised to see that pop up on screen.

**You've lived in many places and traveled all over the world. Do you speak other languages?**

I spoke Korean as a child when my older siblings first came over from Korea, but now it just comes here and there if at all. I studied French for four years and it comes back when I'm in France for an extended period. My Italian is terrible and mostly just from when I studied classical. I hope to resurrect that language because I adore my trips to Italy.

**We close each ABFF INSIDER interview with Five Favorites. Time to get to yours!**

**Favorite Place You've Visited**  
South of France

**Favorite Dessert**  
Tiramisu or anything custard-filled

**Favorite Song of All Time**  
The violin theme music from *Legends of the Fall* and anything Whitney Houston

**Favorite Classic Movie**  
*The Sound of Music* (I have confidence in sunshine!!)

**Favorite Childhood Game**  
Capture the Flag

-Story by Lamonia Deanne Brown

## UP NEXT



**Want to hear more from Merle?**  
Join us in Miami at the ABFF this June and catch on our New Faces of TV panel, sponsored by American Airlines.

**Stay connected to Merle:**  
[@merledandridge](https://www.instagram.com/merledandridge)



Based on the #1 New York Times Bestseller.



AMANDLA STENBERG

NICK ROBINSON



Risk Everything... For Love.

# EVERYTHING, EVERY THING

WARNER BROS. PICTURES AND METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER PICTURES PRESENT  
 AN ALLOY ENTERTAINMENT PRODUCTION "EVERYTHING, EVERYTHING" AMANDLA STENBERG NICK ROBINSON ANA DE LA REGUERA AND ANIKA NONI ROSE COSTUME DESIGNER AVERY PLEWES MUSIC BY KIER LEHMAN EDITOR LUDWIG GÖRANSSON EDITOR NANCY RICHARDSON, ACE  
 PRODUCTION DESIGNER CHARISSE CARDENAS DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY IGOR JADUE-LILLO EXECUTIVE PRODUCER VICTOR HO PRODUCED BY LESLIE MORGENSTEIN, P.G.A. ELYSA DUTTON, P.G.A. BASED ON THE BOOK BY NICOLA YOON SCREENPLAY BY J. MILLS GOODLOE DIRECTED BY STELLA MEGHIE  
 THematic ELEMENTS AND BRIEF SENSUALITY  
**May 19**  
 #EVERYTHINGEVERYTHING  
 WARNER BROS. PICTURES  
 SNAP TO UNLOCK

# New On Screen

ABFF INSIDER Know More.



**BEAT SHAZAM**  
FOX  
Series Premiere May 25

Jamie Foxx is set to host *BEAT SHAZAM*, a unique and interactive game show in which teams of two race against the clock and each other as they attempt to identify the biggest hit songs of all time. In the end, the team with the highest score will go on to compete against Shazam, the world's most popular song identification app, for the chance to win a cash prize.



**CAPTAIN UNDERPANTS: THE FIRST EPIC MOVIE**  
DreamWorks Animation  
In Theaters June 2

Based on the bestselling book series and boasting an A-list cast of comedy superstars headed by Kevin Hart, Ed Helms and Jordan Peele, this raucously subversive family comedy tells the story of two overly imaginative pranksters, George and Harold, who hypnotize their principal into thinking he's a ridiculously enthusiastic, incredibly dimwitted superhero named Captain Underpants.



**DAYTIME DIVAS**  
VH-1  
Series Premiere June 5

Inspired by the book *Satan's Sisters* written by Star Jones, one of the original co-hosts of *The View*, the series will chronicle the daily fireworks that erupt between the five female co-hosts of a fictitious long-running talk show, "The Lunch Hour." On screen, they are best friends with five very different points of view, but behind the scenes they inhabit a world of power struggles, cat-fights and cocktails. Cast includes Vanessa L. Williams and Tichina Arnold.



**QUEEN SUGAR**  
OWN  
Season 2 Premiere June 20 & 21

This summer Ralph Angel, Nova and Charley will continue working to save their father's legacy and sugarcane mill, while navigating their own personal lives. Season 2 will once again showcase a diverse, all-female directorial team on the OWN network.



**CAN'T STOP, WON'T STOP**  
Live Nation Productions  
In Theaters this June

This documentary takes a behind-the-scenes look at Bad Boy Entertainment's legacy and offers an in-depth look at last May's two-night anniversary extravaganza that took place at Brooklyn's Barclays Center in honor of The Notorious B.I.G. It also tells how Bad Boy started, prospered, and how certain tragic events—including the death of The Notorious B.I.G.—changed everything.

# #WorkGoals

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**Byron Allen,**  
Founder, Chairman & CEO  
Entertainment Studios

Byron Allen is the Founder, Chairman and CEO of Entertainment Studios, and is a worldwide leader in the entertainment industry. In 1993, he launched his first series, *Entertainers with Byron Allen*, a weekly, one-hour series profiling stars of film and television.

Entertainment Studios currently produces, distributes and sells advertising for 38 television series, making it the largest independent producer/distributor of first-run syndicated programming for broadcast television globally. In 2009, Allen became the first television entrepreneur to simultaneously own and launch six 24-hour HD television networks (PETS.TV, COMEDY.TV, RECIPE.TV, CARS.TV, ES.TV and MYDESTINATION.TV). In 2012, Entertainment Studios launched its seventh HD cable network, JUSTICECENTRAL.TV, a 24/7 HD legal and news cable television network dedicated to courtroom shows, legal news and a broad range of law-oriented original content. Entertainment Studios provides programming to traditional and emerging distribution platforms, including 1,400 television stations across the U.S.

In 2015, Allen purchased Freestyle Releasing, a full-service theatrical motion picture distribution company. In 2016, Allen acquired TheGrio, a digital news platform that focuses on news, entertainment and social media for African Americans. He is currently based in Los Angeles.



**Moira Griffin**  
Executive Director, Inclusion  
Fox Entertainment Group

Moira Griffin joins the Fox Entertainment Group as the Executive Director, Inclusion. She previously held the position of Senior Manager of Diversity Initiatives at the Sundance Institute where she focused on creating an inclusive space for diverse artists to thrive by helping them gain access to programs within the institute, as well as access to the international marketplace, finance and emerging technologies. Prior to her position at Sundance she worked as an Independent Producer and Festival Strategist. Her award-winning projects include *The New Black*, *Black Folk Don't Hug*, and *The Contest*, all of which premiered at festivals including Sundance, SXSW, AFI Docs, and Human Rights Watch Film Festival. Moira recently worked as a producer on *Night Shift* which was executive produced by Viola Davis's company Juvee Productions. Moira is also founding director of Rooftop Films. In addition, she developed the Ethiopia Film Initiative as a consultant with the IETFF in Monaco, which supports Ethiopian filmmakers and the development of an Ethiopian film industry. Originally from the border cities of Windsor (Ontario) and Detroit (Michigan), she holds degrees in Media Studies and Japanese Studies from the University of Windsor.

## #ABFF



**ABFF GREENLIGHTERS ACADEMY Boot Camp**

The inaugural ABFF Greenlighters Academy boot camp took place April 30-May 2 in Los Angeles. Terrence J. hosted the Academy fellows—Chinedum Nwaigwe, Maya Smith, Giselle Johnson Te'Shone Davidson, and Allan Meade, and—who enjoyed two days of meet and greets, lunches, dinners and activities with over 20 Hollywood corporate executives and celebrities. For updated information on participants and to see photos, go to <http://www.abff.com/abff-greenlighters-academy/>.



**ABFF Business of Entertainment Talk Series**

Join us Thursday, Friday and Saturday for candid "one-on-one" conversations with the industry's most dynamic artists and entertainment executives. Creator and executive producer of the *Love and Hip-Hop* franchise, Mona Scott-Young, kicks off the series on June 15 at the New World Center in Miami. Your seat for this session is waiting.



**ABFF Comedy Wings Finalists**

The five finalists for the ABFF Comedy Wings Competition are Brandall Cole, TuRae Gordon, Shereen Kassam, Cyrus Steele II and Jason Weems. Come see them battle it out on Friday, June 16, at the ABFF in Miami, FL. This event is for pass holders only so get yours at [abff.com](http://abff.com) today!

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