

My Life at the Film Festival

by Phyllis Chesler



Lena Horne and Eddie (“Rochester”) Anderson in *Cabin in the Sky*

This shut-in has been conducting a film festival every night in her living room. I’ve time-traveled via costume dramas; revisited World War Two again and again via spy dramas; become overly familiar with All Things British in an endless assortment of mysteries, comedies, and royal family dramas—and with All Things French, German, Scandinavian, Italian, and Israeli.

But—the documentary that premiered just the other night, the evening of Martin Luther King day on PBS was simply terrific. Titled “How it Feels to be Free” (the name of a song written and sung by the searingly great Nina Simone), the film was

based on a book by Ruth Sarah Feldstein: "Black Women Entertainers and The Civil Rights Movement."

The documentary focuses on the careers of six Black Women Entertainers: Lena Horne, Abbey Lincoln, Nina Simone, Diahann Carroll, Cicely Tyson, and Pam Grier. I LOVED Pam Grier, who became twinned in my mind with the beautiful, badass, take-charge women whom she played. I also LOVED Nina Simone, her raw power; and Abbey Lincoln, plenty ditto; and oh, the acting chops on Cicely Tyson; not to mention the elegant, beautiful Lena; and the distinguished, glamorous Carroll (who had quite a civil rights history behind her perfectly coiffed Self.)

These ultra-talented and beautiful women were denied parts—Lena Horne was not allowed to play the light-skinned black woman, Julie, in "Showboat." The part went to Ava Gardner (Lena's "best white girl friend"), who had to wear "Light Egyptian" makeup, specially made for Lena Horne.

Who can make this up?

Back in the day, Southern theaters would not allow black actors and actresses to speak any lines; they could sing. We enjoy the younger singers and actresses in performance—and on camera words long afterwards in the film.

On camera commentaries were offered by Feldstein herself—and by Lena Horne's daughter, Gail Lumet Buckley, and by Alicia Keys, Halle Berry, Shonda Rimes, Tammy L. Kernodle, Lena Waithe, La Tanya Richardson Jackson, Salamisha Tillett, Charlene Regester, and many others.

I recognized so many New York City scenes: Cafe Society, the coffee houses on MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village. The documentary also allowed me to revisit the burning issues of racism and the civil rights movement in 1960's America. I lived it. Watching this film riveted me to my chair and brought me back in time. And here it is.

<https://www.pbs.org/video/american-masters-how-it-feels-to-be-free-zzfh8i/>