

# UGLY BETTY'S VANESSA Williams A Sizzling Superstar

/ By Ruth Bashinsky / Photography By Gilles Toucas /





Playing the gorgeous villain on the hit ABC series *Ugly Betty* is a role Vanessa Williams has really been able to sink her teeth into. It is not just the fabulous designer clothes Williams gets to wear as Wilhelmina Slater, the ruthless editor in chief of *MODE Magazine* (and no, Williams does not get to keep the clothes; they all go back to wardrobe)... or the spicy love scenes she has with Connor Owens, her very attractive on-again, off-again beau. The real treat for Williams is to play a character that is completely different from her own self. In fact, the only thing Williams has in common with her villainous character, she says, is that they both wear the same size. "I love playing someone who is so calculating and manipulative," says the star. "It is a wonderful opportunity to be powerful, to be glamorous and to have amazing, witty lines that a whole room of writers comes up with. Executing them is a joy. We've got a great ensemble. It couldn't be better working conditions."

En route to a media appearance, Williams took the time to speak with *The Boulevard* magazine about her upcoming projects for the new year, her charity work, one of her secret beauty weapons, and how she is able to manage it all.

Since Williams hit the show business scene back in the '80s, she has been a one-woman force not to be reckoned with. A multitasking performer in the entertainment industry, Williams has won critical acclaim for her work in film, stage and television. She has received countless awards, including a Tony, and has been nominated for numerous Grammys and Emmys

throughout her career. She has even been granted a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

In April, Williams returns to Broadway starring in the new musical *Sondheim on Sondheim*, at the Roundabout Theater. The play is a retrospective of Stephen Sondheim's life and music. Williams, who has not been on Broadway since 2002 when she starred in the musical *Into the Woods*, is excited to get back to the stage and to performing in front of a live audience. "We don't finish the show [*Ugly Betty*] until the end of April, so I will be doing double duty for two months – doing the TV show as well as trying to do eight shows a week. There are going to be a few shows I will be unable to make because my first priority is the TV show, but the Roundabout was very much aware of that. And," Williams explains, "it was one of those opportunities where it was a limited run, a chance to get back on Broadway and I did not have to commit for a year. Plus, I knew the creators and knew I was going to be taken care of." How could she say no?

An accomplished singer and songwriter, Williams has sold 10 million albums and singles over her career. Last June, she released her eighth album, *The Real Thing*, a compilation of jazz and Latin music that debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard Jazz Charts. She credits her love of music to her parents – both music teachers – who helped nurture her dance, music and singing talents, and encouraged her to pursue the arts. Her interest in performing grew into a passion for musical theater, which eventually became her major as a scholarship student at Syracuse

University. Just this past year, nearly 25 years after leaving school to pursue a career in entertainment, Williams received her bachelor's degree in fine arts. She had been a few credits short back in the day, but in the intervening years, she earned enough life credits to graduate. Last spring, Williams delivered the convocation address at her alma mater, telling the 480 graduates at Syracuse's College of Visual and Performing Arts to "cherish the moment; these days are irreplaceable and are the beginning of the rest of your life." As a mother, Williams was proud to be part of such an important milestone in a young person's life. "It was great to inspire and to be able to be an example. Also, it was nice to be an example for my own children and to have a diploma to show them when they are in college or are on their way."

Working on a hit series, starring in a Broadway production, promoting her latest album, and donating time to charitable causes is quite ambitious for this celebrity, who is also a very

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down-to-earth mother raising four children who range in age from 9 to 22. One ponders how Williams is able to manage it all with such ease. "Ease is the illusion," she laughs out loud. "It does get incredibly stressful. The most important thing for me is to get healthy because I cannot do anything if I am not healthy. So I have to make sure that my voice stays in good shape and my body stays in good shape and then I will be fine." She pauses. "Talk to me in the spring when I am doing double duty, then I will tell you how I am dealing with it."

As busy as life can get, Williams makes time to give back. Over the years, she has supported issues including homelessness abuses, women's issues and AIDS, among others. One charity she is passionate about is Dress for Success, a New York City-based not-for-profit that helps disadvantaged women succeed in the workforce by providing professional attire, support and career development tools. Williams, who has been donating garments to Dress for Success for years, has recently been working hands-on with the organization to help raise awareness. In the spring, she teamed up with Allergan, Inc., the makers of Botox Cosmetic – botulinum toxin type A, the most popular physician-adminis-

tered aesthetic treatment—as a leader of their Express Success charitable education campaign. Allergan donated \$250,000 to help the organization with its mission. Williams, who teaches her own children the importance of giving back, felt grateful to be part of such an important cause. "It has been an amazing experience. Giving back is always something that makes you feel better, but when you can see the results, it's even better. I think it is important to feel wonderful about yourself and to have a support system, and that is what Dress for Success offers. For me, I could not do or be the person that I am without my family. They are the ones who inspire me and give me the support I need." Williams, who couldn't possibly look more stunning than she already is, has been open about her use of Botox. "I started using Botox Cosmetic when I turned 40. I just wanted to maintain. Also, because I am an actress, it is really important for me to be able to have expressions." Williams encourages those who may be interested in getting the procedure, but may be apprehensive, to ask questions. "Going to an aesthetic physician is a must – talk to them about what you want. If you don't know a doctor, you can look on [Botoxcosmetic.com](http://Botoxcosmetic.com)."

A native of Millwood, NY, Williams says her parents seemed to know early on that their daughter was destined for great things. Her birth announcement read: "Here She Is, Miss America." As fate would have it, Vanessa Williams was actually crowned Miss America in 1983, the first African-American woman to hold the title. "It was kind of ironic that those were the announcements they picked out," she says. Looking back at the controversy surrounding photos that prompted her to surrender her title, Williams says: "I think you are who you are. I think the experiences in life don't change who you are. They make you stronger. I've always had an incredible support system growing up and I continue to have it and that is the key."

And if you think you know all there is to know about the talented star, odds are you don't know that Williams loves Irish music. She also loves to cook, bake and drive (fast, she says, is her favorite speed). In truth, however, she says that she is so busy that any spare time she has she likes to spend with her children.

And for anyone who may have a boss similar to Wilhelmina: Should they run? What advice would Williams offer? "Wilhelmina is certainly driven and eager to succeed, so those traits may be something an employee could take away from the experience; but in all honesty, I would suggest he or she get a new job!" ■