

My Broadway Debut—at 70

Regional actor Kim Sullivan made it to the big time, with aplomb



Sullivan at the Arden Theatre in Philadelphia

I'M WHAT'S KNOWN as a Wilsonian actor—I specialize in the works of the playwright August Wilson. I've starred in all 10 plays of his American Century Cycle in regional theaters, and I've also performed in Europe. But at 70, I had given up hope of ever making it to Broadway.

Then, in March 2022, I was in Mountain View, California, appearing in Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*, when my agent called. She told me the director LaTanya Richardson Jackson wanted me to audition for a Broadway production of Wilson's

The Piano Lesson that would star her husband, Samuel L. Jackson. The play was scheduled to open on October 13.

I threw together an audition tape, which is what we do now since the pandemic. I didn't think I'd get a role, and I was right: I didn't. But I did get offered the job of understudying a character named Wining Boy and being the second understudy for Sam Jackson's character, Doaker. So I went to New York.

Understudying is a thankless job. It was psychologically painful to go to the theater every day, month

after month, and watch other actors work. My dressing room was on the fifth floor. There are no elevators in these old theaters, and I couldn't make that climb every day, so during performances I would huddle with the techies in the basement, where there was a couch, a monitor, cookies and coffee.

At a rehearsal in early November, I was coughing, and people were avoiding me.

"Kimmy, I think you're sick," the stage manager said. "You're sick, boy. Go home."

I tested positive for COVID and

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went home to Philadelphia to recuperate.

Three or four days later, I got an email: “Kim, you’re gonna go on November 29, so get yourself well, and get yourself well quick.” You better believe I got well. When I got back to New York, I was raring to go.

I was going on as Wining Boy in the place of Michael Potts, who had to miss a performance because he was filming a TV show. Michael was kind enough to let me use his dressing room on the second floor, and I got to see how the first team lives. People fetch things for you, dote on you. It was something else.

Stars aren’t obliged to prep the understudy, but to Sam’s credit, he rehearsed with me for two hours before the show, to make sure the performance was letter-perfect. Wining Boy is one of my favorite characters. I had played him before and I knew my lines. I wasn’t nervous. I was hyped, but not nervous. And everything went fine.

During the curtain call, actress Danielle Brooks, who played Doaker’s niece, told the audience, “We want to introduce Mr. Kim Sullivan, who is making his Broadway debut at 70 years old!” The crowd went berserk. This humbled me. I almost cried, right there on stage.

As I was coming off the stage, Sam



Sullivan played Solly Two Kings in August Wilson’s *Gem of the Ocean* in Mountain View, California, in 2022.

told me, “Take a picture with this guy.” Only when “this guy” put his fist up did I realize it was Sugar Ray Leonard. I’m taking pictures with Sugar Ray Leonard! He said, “I saw you jab, man. I like your jab.” I was like, “Oh, my God!”

The next day, everything went back to normal, like nothing happened. I did get reviewed by one reviewer who happened to see my performance. She liked it.

Almost as soon as the show closed in January, I was on my way to Paris to perform in a play about Nina Simone. Now I’m back on the regional Wilson circuit.

I would love to get back to Broadway, but I don’t think I’ll ever take an understudy job again. If I ever do go back there, it will be as part of the first team. —As told to *Merlisa Lawrence Corbett*

*Kim Sullivan, 71, is an award-winning Equity actor who lives in Philadelphia. He recently played Nina Simone’s father in *Silence and Fear*.*



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