

Crazy

At BU she was a track star and an opera singer. Now, Uzo Aduba is an Emmy Award-winning actress in *Orange Is the New Black*.

By Susan Seligson

AS A BU UNDERGRADUATE, Uzo Aduba was a triple threat. A runner, an actress, and a singer, she racked up track medals and stage credits, and at one point set her sights on a career in opera (she's sung at the White House and at Paris' Notre Dame cathedral). But Aduba chose acting, a perfect fit from her first stage appearance in *Translations of Xhosa* at the Olney Theatre Center, which won her a Helen Hayes Award nomination for best supporting actress. A decade after leaving the University, Aduba has achieved international stardom thanks to her portrayal—embodiment would

Good







JESSICA MIGLIO FOR NETFLIX

UZO ADUBA says her performance as Crazy Eyes in *Orange Is the New Black* (left) is informed by the question, “How far can someone go for love?”

idol, Meryl Streep. Aduba is Crazy Eyes. “I’m in love with her,” she says.

From the time she first read it, “the script has always felt like a love story to me,” says Aduba, who auditioned for the part of Jenae, the former track star, but was handed Crazy Eyes instead, wondering “what happened in that audition room?” Her performance is informed by “exploring the question, how far can

someone go for love—the poetry, the throwing of food, the peeing on the floor,” she adds, referring to a cringe-worthy scene in which Suzanne stakes her claim to newcomer Piper in the most primal way. “Suzanne is someone who’s operating from a place of good intentions, and I really wanted to put that honesty, purity, and vulnerability into it,” says Aduba, who recalls the liner notes describing Crazy Eyes as “innocent like a child—except children aren’t scary.”

Even in light of glossy spreads in *Time* and *People* along with interviews on major TV talk shows, Aduba usually navigates New York City’s streets and subways in anonymity. Liberated from khaki prison scrubs, with coiffed hair and eyes retracted to normal size, Aduba is a stunner, with a broad smile revealing gapped front teeth she has no intention of “fixing,” thank you very much.

“She’s totally sincere, totally honest,” says Aduba’s College of Fine Arts voice teacher, mezzo-soprano Claudia Catania, a former Metropolitan Opera soloist, who taught at BU for nine years. “Aduba was a classical voice major and she came into class and sang Andrew

be more accurate—of the character Suzanne Warren, aka “Crazy Eyes,” on the addictive hit Netflix series *Orange Is the New Black*. The role earned her a Creative Arts Emmy Award for Outstanding Guest Actress in a Comedy Series in August.

In what’s being lauded as one of the most powerful acting ensembles in memory, *OITNB* inmates and guards alike struggle to maintain their humanity in the confines of the fictional Litchfield federal minimum security prison. Although modesty and professionalism would prevent Aduba from agreeing, Crazy Eyes upstages them all. She is a complex, nuanced creation—an innocent with a quick, well-versed mind, a child’s frail psyche, and a simmering lethal violent streak.

“When I met Suzanne, it just felt right,” says Aduba (CFA’05), who also won the 2014 Critics Choice Award for the supporting role.

A comedy-drama created by Jenji Kohan (*Weeds*), the show is based on a memoir by Piper Kerman (*OITNB*’s driving character, Piper Chapman), a Boston Brahmin and Smith College grad-

uate who served a year in federal prison for a felony drug conviction. Except for a few established names, *OITNB* is populated largely by a formidable cast of aging character actors and newcomers. Among them are former *Star Trek* star Kate Mulgrew, Litchfield’s fierce but lovable fixture “Red” Reznikov and, says Aduba, the only actor to remain in character between takes, and Laura Prepon of *That ’70s Show*, who snuggles and spars with Chapman as Alex Vause, her ex-lover and the once high-living drug trafficker who landed Chapman in this mess.

IN HER BU DAYS, Aduba was a natural entertainer and a hilarious “big personality,” which won her the adoration of her teammates on the track team, says her former coach, Lesley Lehane. She excelled in the 55-meter, 100-meter, and 200-meter races and won the athletics department’s Aldo “Buff” Donelli Leadership Award, given to a senior for “outstanding leadership on and off the field.” Aduba is one of BU’s all-time top sprinters; she ran 55 meters in 7.07 against a long-standing rec-

ord of 7.03. Still the competitive athlete, she ran the New York City Marathon in November 2013.

And of course, she sang. “I remember the very first team dinner before a big meet, when I asked her to sing because I knew she was a voice major,” says Lehane. Aduba belted out a gospel song, and Lehane recalls “feeling like a fool because she really should’ve been singing in a concert hall.”

As Crazy Eyes, with her seemingly middleweight bulk, signature Medusa-like Bantu braids, and yes, those peepers that can look as outsized as whitewall tires, Aduba is a force of nature. At times unhinged, at times bluntly and wisely truth-telling like the proverbial court jester, Crazy Eyes recites Shakespeare, and in flashbacks we learn she is the adopted child of a sanctimonious white couple, a once-towering, awkward preteen who was upstaged by the arrival of a towheaded “miracle” sister.

Even as she pummels a fellow inmate at the bidding of her prison “mommy,” the sociopathic Vee (Yvonne Parker), Aduba’s Crazy Eyes is never without a tender streak, walking a pathological tightrope with the confidence of the greats, like her

Lloyd Webber's *Aida*, and I realized this woman was really an actress and musical theater person," says Catania. From the start, says Jim Petosa, director of BU's School of Theatre and a CFA professor, Aduba was "extraordinary on stage and off."

ADUBA WAS BORN IN Medfield, Mass., the child of Nigerian immigrant college professors in an athletically gifted family that included a sister who excelled at track and a brother who won medals as a javelin thrower. Her full first name is Uzoamaka, an Igbo word meaning "the road is good." Her parents "named me that when they came over to America because it was a journey that led them through a civil war, but it was worth it because my parents met and then they had me, so the road was good," Aduba told the *Daily Beast*, adding that back then she and her family were the only Nigerians in Medfield, a fact that helps her empathize with the otherness of Suzanne. Accepted to BU on an athletic scholarship, she says she chose the University for its strong arts program.

"I realized in high school that arts were my first love," Aduba told the *Daily Beast*.

She describes Catania as one of several people at CFA who had a direct impact on her life, including the late James Spruill, an associate professor of theater arts, and the late director Jon Lipsky, a professor of playwriting and acting. It was Spruill (CFA'75) who in 2003 cast Aduba in *Translations of Xhosa*, a student's thesis play that was produced at

the Olney Theatre Center, outside Washington, D.C. Spruill, she says, "turned my world upside down, because I was a voice major and he stopped me one day as I was walking into class and said, 'There's a play that takes place in South Africa, and they need a black woman.'"

Shiela Kibbe, a CFA assistant professor of music and chair of the collaborative piano department, forged a bond with Aduba when the future Crazy Eyes was a student in Kibbe's song repertoire class. "At CFA we don't have a lot of African Americans and that was a challenge for her," recalls Kibbe, who describes Aduba as "determined to succeed, but on her own terms." Aduba longed to sing a broader, more diverse repertoire, something she and Kibbe discussed often. "I always had a soft spot for her," says Kibbe.

Aduba made her Broadway debut in 2007 as Toby in *Coram Boy*, and from 2011 to 2012 went on to join the cast of the original revival of *Godspell* at Manhattan's Circle in the Square Theatre. "From the moment she left BU she was a working actor," says Catania. "What I loved

about her was her energy to create, to perform, to be great. She had an absolute fierceness for everything she did. She always owned her soul, and she always brought something new and interesting to the table."

Aduba stays in close touch with her BU teachers, and refers to Catania, now an assistant professor of voice at Westminster College of the Arts and the Mannes School of Music, as being like a mother to her, while Catania says if she could have a daughter, she'd like her to be like Aduba. It was Catania who cheered Aduba on after one of the actress' few major career disappointments: losing the lead in the Broadway production of *The Color Purple* to Fantasia Barrino. Aduba "kept saying, that part was mine," and was on the verge of giving up acting and becoming the lawyer her parents always wanted her to be, recalls Catania. "That's when the phone rang for the Crazy Eyes part, which at first was supposed to be a vignette," she says. "But she was so fantastic she became a major player. That's Uzo."

Aduba isn't the only former BU student on the *OITNB* set. Kaipō Schwab (CFA'93), a former acting coach who has worked with BU alumni, has appeared on the show six times as the prison medic.

For Aduba, being part of *Orange Is the New Black* feels "like I'm in a Dickens novel, watching so many characters come to the surface" and making important contributions to the thickening plot. Beyond the "incredible stories and incredibly talented people," the show is also, Aduba hopes, provoking a conversation about the humanity of prisoners. "These are mothers, daughters, sisters, and neighbors," and the actors as well as viewers have been encouraged to "think differently about the people locked away behind those walls," she says.

Crazy Eyes fever may be sweeping Netflix nation, but Aduba remains "humble, kind, and grateful," says Catania. "Was she really peeing in that scene? I don't want to know. All I know is, she's bigger than life and doesn't mind being bigger than life." ■

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