

Wambui Bahati's inspirational balancing act

By Brenda Alesii

Ten years ago, John-Ann Washington disappeared. Sort of.

John-Ann Washington was born in Greensboro, North Carolina, 54 years ago. She was named after her grandfather, but legally changed her name in 1995 to reflect a new facet of her life.

Good bye, John-Ann. Hello Wambui Bahati, a Swahili name that means “good fortune” (Wambui) and “singer of songs” (Bahati). Wambui, a singer, dancer, and storyteller, embodies that new identity today, living in New York City and performing in an autobiographical play called *Balancing Act*, a candid and sometimes comical portrayal of her bipolar disorder.

“I developed the play in 1996–97, when I started feeling better and was ready to deal with the world again,” says Wambui. “I wasn’t sure if anyone would hire me, so I started writing a musical about my journey. You write what you know. I finished it in a few weeks [while living in Greensboro].” Wambui took her play to a number of mental health agencies. Beth Melcher, the former executive director of the Greensboro affiliate of NAMI North Carolina, saw the production’s potential and wanted to introduce it throughout her state.

“Beth had a vision—she thought out of the box. She wrote a 25-page outline explaining to her NAMI affiliates how to book the play in churches, auditoriums, schools,” recalls Wambui. “In the

beginning, we put out 100 chairs and I thought that no one would come.” As it turns out, every chair was filled for that performance, held in a community performance room at the Greensboro Cultural Arts Center. “I heard over and over again how grateful people were that I was talking about my bipolar story,” Wambui says.

And what a story it is.

As an eight-year-old, Wambui felt enveloped by a curtain of darkness. “I was always uncomfortable,” she says, “crying at the drop of a hat, experiencing severe depression. Then I would have laughing attacks. I was a loner, but good at camouflaging it. I was often the life of the party—singing, dancing, and yet I’d go home and feel such sadness.”

Wambui’s pendulum-like pattern of emotions continued during her college years, while an acting major at New York University School of the Arts. Things took a dramatic dip one day, when Wambui was on her way to class. “In a split second, I decided to skip class and go to Los Angeles, a place I had never been. I had a TWA charge card, my dance clothes, and \$20 on me,” says Wambui. “I remember waiting for the plane, seeing palm trees when we landed, and taking a taxi to Hollywood and Vine because I knew those streets from watching TV.”

Wambui remembers only bits and pieces of that L.A. experience, likening

Photos: JAMES K. KRIEGSMAN JR.

it to a sleepwalking state. She worked as a babysitter and describes her condition as “manic and psychotic.” “People thought I was functioning, but I was in another world.”

Eventually, Wambui made her way back east, returning to school to pursue her theatrical career. Good fortune was there to greet her. At age 21, she made her professional debut in *Godspell* at Ford’s Theater in Washington, D.C.

From all appearances, Wambui’s life was then on a fast track. She was working steadily in an acclaimed production and was earning good money. Beneath that veneer, however, was a young woman desperately driven to a suicide attempt. “I overdosed on alcohol and antidepressants. I was hospitalized in the psychiatric ward of D.C. General with depression. No one saw me as bipolar, even though I was running exercise classes and fixing everyone’s hair in the ward,” she reports.

Incredibly, she persuaded hospital personnel to let her leave each night so she could perform in the *Godspell* production.

During her 20s and 30s, Wambui was frequently hospitalized with episodes of depression. Despite those challenges, she married, had a daughter, Marie, and continued performing in featured roles in a wide range of touring productions, including *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Nunsense*, *Don’t Bother Me*, *I Can’t Cope*, and *Little Ham*. Wambui says life on the road agreed with her. “That’s where I came alive and what keeps me alive today. I enjoy the road because it’s not the real world—everything is set up for you—meals, banking, hotels. I loved the constant travel because it fit right in with my mania.”

Her last big tour was with *The Wiz* in 1984. During that road trip, Wambui’s daughter, Julie, was born prematurely in San Francisco. “She only weighed one pound. While I was focused

on the baby, I lost it—spiraling down, down, down,” Wambui says.

Though Julie eventually thrived following a three-month hospitalization, Wambui’s life continued to show signs of the still undiagnosed disorder. “I remember throwing away my address book because

I wanted to cut everyone out,” she says. “That’s when I started shopping like a junkie. We lived in San Rafael, California, and I would load up the babies and go shopping in San Francisco. Everyone else was still paying special attention to the baby.

I was sad and angry. I went through a lot of money, my husband was looking for work, but I never took all those emotions out on the kids. I never spanked or hit them.”

By the mid-1980s, Wambui and her husband divorced; she and her two daughters headed back to New York City. At this point in her life story, the bright lights of Broadway seemed a world away.

“I couldn’t get myself together to go on auditions, I was dealing with two young children, everything was so difficult. We ended up on welfare.”

After dabbling as a theater manager and later as an assistant to Avery Brooks, who was starring in the one-man show portraying the life of Paul Robeson, Wambui was overcome with paranoia, depression, and suicidal thoughts. She explains that one of her duties as Brooks’

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assistant involved laundering his shirts. Her episodes of paranoia fed a mistaken belief that she had been asked to do the laundry because she was African American. On the other hand, she loved her previous job as a theater manager, one that involved a lot of responsibility, but one she had felt obligated to quit.

“I couldn’t stop crying,” she says of her emotions at the time. “All I wanted to do was jump onto the subway tracks.”

Admission to Roosevelt Hospital in New York City was the next stop. A psychiatrist there treated her with an antidepressant, but Wambui didn’t like the accompanying weight gain. While juggling her meds, she realized she couldn’t survive on her own. Her finances in ruins, she decided it was time to take her daughters back to North Carolina.

A bipolar disorder diagnosis finally came in 1994, when Wambui was 44 and yet another suicide attempt found her in the hospital. “I came into the hospital totally distraught, but by the next day, I was straightening up the rooms, doing other patients’ hair, telling hospital administrators how to do their jobs,” she says. “I was in and out of the hospital and put on lots of med combos. My kids were finally sent to live with their father.”

Wambui attended group therapy and went back to school. Slowly, her focus began to change. She began following a vegetarian

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diet, became a devotee of self-help gurus Anthony Robbins and Wayne Dyer, and started meditating on a daily basis.

In the summer of 2001, Wambui moved into a Manhattan condo that had been renovated by Habitat for Humanity, a cause championed by former president Jimmy Carter, and that she and her daughter also supported through their own “sweat equity” on the project. A year later, Wambui created a show for Carter demonstrating the correlation between mental illness and homelessness. “I was in awe, moved by his genuine kindness and sincerity,” she says.

Now, Wambui says her life can be summed up in one word: “great.” She continues to monitor her diet closely, exercises regularly, meditates for an hour each



show makes me relive my experiences over and over. It’s like therapy and it becomes easier every time I perform it. The last song in *Balancing Act* says it all: ‘I forgot to remember the answer is within.’”

Often using the name “Miss Inspiration” as part of her public persona, Wambui tells another story that reveals her inner qualities. “A young Honduran woman whom I befriended called me ‘Miss Inspiration,’ because she said I make

morning, and listens to inspirational CDs.

Thanks to the compelling *Balancing Act*, her past is never far behind. “The hour and fifteen minutes of the

everyone feel better. That made me feel better, too. I enjoy inspirational speaking and performing and sharing in a way that makes all of us feel good and hopeful.”

Wambui—candid, warm, dynamic, full of life—strikes a chord with professionals and laypeople alike. Her show, according to one psychiatrist who recently saw it in Michigan, is a balance between education and entertainment, achieving the highest purpose of theater.

Now that’s a rave review. 🌟

Information on Wambui’s touring schedule and speaking engagements can be found at www.wambui.com

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