



Belted satin ball gown by Roland Nivelais; 18K mixed diamond cluster drop earrings by Paul Morelli

# AS Pretty



Duchess satin evening gown by Roland Nivelais, available at Bergdorf Goodman; 18K white South Sea pearl and white diamond double dangle earrings by Paul Morelli

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BY LOUISE T. GUNTHER

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# DOES

South African diva **Pretty Yende** continues to live out her dreams.





## THE FIRST TIME I SAW PRETTY YENDE ONSTAGE, SHE FELL FLAT ON HER FACE—LITERALLY. BY MOST ACCOUNTS, THAT WAS THE ONLY MISSTEP OF HER STORYBOOK CAREER.

Certainly, that pratfall, tripping on a step at her frenetic first entrance, was the sole flaw in her stunning Met debut, as Countess Adèle in *Le Comte Ory* in 2013; by the end of her dazzling account of that wildly challenging role, the audience was roaring bravos, having completely forgotten that anything had gone wrong. Apart from her ravishing singing and enticing face and figure, Yende managed to project an enchanting innocence, charm and sense of romantic rapture, transforming a production that had struck me in previous iterations as somewhat slick and cynical. That ability to shed her own radiance in a way that illuminates and rejuvenates all around her is one of her profoundest gifts.

Yende's quasi-miraculous ascent from the tiny town of Piet Retief, where her family spoke Zulu, to the grand tour of the world's great opera houses, where she speaks lightly accented English and sings in impeccable Italian and French, has captured the

From top left: as Adina in *L'Elisir d'Amore* at Covent Garden, 2017; Adina at the Met, 2018; as Countess Adèle in *Le Comte Ory* at the Met, 2013, with Juan-Diego Flórez (Ory)

imaginations of fans and “objective” observers alike. The trailer for her debut solo album, *A Journey*, compared her story to “a modern fairy tale.” She has penetrated the pop-culture consciousness with appearances on *The Wendy Williams Show* and features in *Marie Claire* and *O*. There is a starry-eyed idealism about her that has been cherished and carefully preserved not only by the artist herself but by the usually cynical media, which, perhaps hungry for a genuine feel-good story, have adopted Yende's reality-based legend and helped it grow.

The positive vibe starts at the source. Even the political reality of her early years in Apartheid-era South Africa seems to have left few scars. “My parents were really wonderful at protecting me in terms of not seeing the world working against me, but instead ‘Everything is possible,’ and ‘Treat everybody right,’ and ‘You’re not different than

anyone else,” she says. “I wasn’t aware of so many things that were going wrong—I was just seeing hope, and that’s how I grew up.”

Yende admits that what she calls the “Pretty Journey,” which began in earnest with an apprenticeship at La Scala, hasn’t come without some degree of culture shock, though, for all her early challenges, one senses that the relentless demands of stardom have been the most daunting of all. “It’s a big jump, you know—the distance alone, leaving my country and going overseas in a country that spoke Italian, and I never spoke Italian, and I had never been away from home. So even though I’m the one who made the wish, I had no idea the actual substance of it. All I knew was I feel this joy when I hear these sounds, and I want to be able to do it, I want to share it. ‘How can I make the next person feel that?’—you know? So you want the wish, but you never really know what is the wish. I didn’t *know* that it meant I’ll be in the papers. I didn’t know it meant that I’ll be a superstar!”

“Now I have to grow into it, so that I can govern it, because otherwise it will consume *me*,” she adds. “It’s important to me to be grounded, and that’s why I try to go home as often as I can.”

At first, Yende, yearning to inspire others with her success, allowed herself to be pulled in many directions, making appearances whenever she set foot in South Africa to “tell the story of ‘I grew up here, and look what’s happened to me.’ Now, I’m learning that I have to try to be very selfish about it,” she says with a smile. “Because none of us expected it. Suddenly you realize there’s only one of you, and it cannot be spread around in all these pieces. That superstar, that superhuman being cannot be without humanness, you know? And that means having my family time, so that I can recuperate physically and psychologically and spiritually. You have to find peace in knowing that saying no is often the best procedure.”

**YENDE SEEMS ABOUT AS GROUNDED** as celebrity divas come. “I grew up in music, singing hymns every night after supper,” she says. “The seed was planted by my grandmother teaching me those songs and pushing me to sing a solo in front of the congregation at five years old! To be able to do that—that’s why I have great confidence now. At the time, it was something that I didn’t like, of course. It wasn’t comfortable! I’m finding that really is what, as a performer, you learn—that you have to be comfortable with being uncomfortable.”

From the beginning of her international endeavors, Yende was determined to avoid the competitive mindset—a paradoxical viewpoint considering that her career was launched through groundbreaking triumphs at international vocal competitions such as the Belvedere, which paved her way to the Scala program. “Comparison is a thief,” she told South African Broadcasting Corporation’s *Expresso Show*, and she reiterates that mantra during our interview.

“Absolutely it is,” she declares. “Because human beings have such diversity, and the voice is unique. No matter how we try to mimic somebody, there’s something that’s just you that nobody else can do. This is something my first teacher tried to teach me—that I need to really look at my gift, because it is valid, if I grow it well, if I learn to love it. Because for a while I was like, ‘No, this is not the voice I want.’”

Yende, who was headed for college to study accounting before the opera bug diverted her to the University of Capetown’s opera program, took a savvy approach to the financial hurdles facing untried South African hopefuls. “That’s where the accountant in me came in,” she says. “I knew I needed to get to Europe, and I knew I couldn’t ask my parents for that. There was an organization that chose students to go there and enter the competitions. I thought, if I could get one sponsorship for a return ticket, I would have told the entire world in one go. But I had to be very clear in my own mind that I was not competing to win—it was more of an orientation. I was presenting what I had, and it plays a big role in the career I’m enjoy-



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Midnight pearl-and-crystal encrusted gown in 4 ply silk by CD Greene, available at Bergdorf Goodman

ing right now—the importance of being comfortable amongst greatness. Because this career is filled with immense greatness, and you have to be comfortable with knowing that your talent also is valid, to be amongst the best of the best.

“I always say that I would have been a very successful accountant,” she adds with a grin, “because I’m very driven and determined. But I don’t think I’d be as happy in my heart.”

The opera world wouldn’t be as happy either. It’s a pleasure to watch Yende sing. As Adina or Lucia, even in the most exacting coloratura passages, there’s no tension visible; her expressions spring from the character’s emotional life. Her astounding technique allows her to use dynamics, rhythm and floritura as expressive musical devices rather than opportunities for virtuoso display.

**THAT COLORATURA FACILITY** is one of her glories. When I ask whether this gift came naturally, she answers both yes and no. “My mom noticed early on that every time a high note would come, I would be just beaming. Also, my teacher in high school was very big on coloratura and singing Handel. But when I got to actually doing technique in Cape Town, I was being trained as a normal lyric soprano—the Countess, Fiordiligi, Mimì. This was partly because my teacher was one of the first black singers to have an international career, and you hardly saw anyone looking like me doing [bel canto] repertoire. But when I got to La Scala, [Mirella] Freni said, ‘You’re so young, and there’s such a lot of flexibility in your voice, maybe you should look at the bel canto repertoire.’ By then, I had lost all the high notes, because I got into my head in terms of technique. I could barely sing a high C. But Freni advised me to do bel canto, and for me to take up this challenge, where

## “I THOUGHT THEY WERE CRAZY, BECAUSE I DIDN’T SEE SO MANY LUCIAS LOOKING LIKE ME.”

I didn’t see as much inspiration, was really a leap of faith. I took it because she’s a great example of healthy singing and longevity.

“The first piece I took was *Puritani*, ‘Ah! Rendetemi la speme’—I know, right?!” She giggles. “But there was something about singing those first lines that had a major connection for my heart of how the phrase would go, how I would like to color it, and the music for me just clicked. But then the challenge came to the coloratura, because my voice was not able to run like that any more, so I had to relearn that, and I had to learn about the *sopracuti*—and that seemed impossible, until I found Mariella Devia. She opened up this possibility for me to remember how I was taught in South Africa—to use

my natural gift. They say in Italian, ‘Tutto nasce dalla natura’—everything is birthed from nature. And *then* you can build the structure from there.”

Yende cites Lucia as another role that seemed off-limits at first. “When it was suggested to me, I thought they were crazy, because I didn’t see so many Lucias looking like me. But then I like challenge—that’s my weakness.” Asked whether she has encountered overt racial barriers in her own career, she gives a measured answer. “No, not really. More than anything, it has been my own inner war inside, of not being maybe as confident,” she muses. “I’ve never felt out of place or pushed away. I’ve always been confronted with compassion and openness. Most of the times, it’s not so powerful what comes



From top: as Zoraide in Rossini’s *Ricciardo e Zoraide* in Pesaro, with Juan-Diego Flórez (Ricciardo); in a *Ricciardo* rehearsal with Sergey Romanovsky (Agorante)





From left:  
as Leïla to Javier  
Camarena's  
Nadir in *Les  
Pêcheurs de  
Perles* at the Met,  
2018; as Elvira  
to Camarena's  
Arturo in  
*I Puritani* in  
Barcelona, 2018

Opposite:  
Duchess satin  
evening gown by  
Roland Nivelais;  
18K white gold ring  
with diamonds  
by HUEB Madison  
Avenue; 18K  
white South Sea  
pearl and white  
diamond double  
dangle earrings  
by Paul Morelli

to us [from others]—it's what we constantly are telling ourselves inside that either builds us or kills us."

Yende's mentor from her Cape Town days, Angelo Gobbato, who headed UCT's opera school through 2008, helped guide that inner voice. "He's an Italian, and he and his family went to South Africa, and at the time, black people were not allowed to even go to school, let alone study classical music. He was like, 'No. They actually have the potential, and I believe that they could stand on the world stage and be excellent performers.' And I'm the fruit of that dream."

"Pretty Yende was one of those very rare and special creatures," Gobbato told *African Voices* on CNN. "You gave her a finger at one session, and at the next session, she came back and gave you a whole arm."

**YENDE SAYS THE FOUNDATION** for her development as an actress was laid at UCT. "My teacher in Cape Town taught us there are different kinds of artists—those who sing note-perfect to the end, but they don't really communicate, and those who might not be so perfect, and yet they leave something with you," she says. "The actress and the singer are one. The composers have given eighty percent of the information, and the words are there, and the production is there. The moment of interacting with people onstage—telling the story because it's happening right now—that's why most of my moods

are never exact. The director gives me the [blocking]—go there, go there—but in terms of the action, it's all in the moment. Instinctively, there are a lot of things I can hear in my heart without them telling me. I have my way most of the time, because it makes sense, and it's real."

A recent post from Yende on Facebook read, "Thank you Lord that my life is a series of endless blessings that are your gifts of kindness and mercy towards me." The sentiment seems sincere. "My way was always to make a home wherever you go," Yende says. "That's why I really felt it was important for me to learn the languages. When you go somewhere, you want to be able to talk, be heard and express. In this journey that can be very lonesome, you don't have to be lonely. There's a huge difference."

"One of the important things for me is for the [public] to know the real person," she adds. "I love life, I love simple things, I love humanness. We do supernatural things, and we get amazing glory, unbelievable ovations, but I'm just like you. I've always just loved to sing, and I think that's what exudes in my performances—that that place feels like home to me. No matter how shaky I could be on my knees, no matter how nervous I feel about a particular phrase or note, there's a joy in me of just sharing my feelings and appreciating this moment of being there. And that's what I wanted when I wished." ■

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