

This is Debbi Morgan



BY DAVIN SEAY

The producers and directors responsible for the second television installment of Alex Haley's outrageously successful genealogy, *Roots*, saw something not immediately apparent in the cherubic allure of Debbi Morgan, a twenty-two-year-old native of Dunn, South Carolina. In *Roots: The Next Generation*, scheduled to air Feb. 18th through the 25th on ABC, Debbi will portray Haley's Great Aunt Elizabeth, one of the two family elders who passed the saga down to the young writer. She is the only actress in the fourteen-hour-long mini-series to play her character from beginning to end, ages eighteen to seventy-five, a remarkable achievement if only because of Debbi's startlingly youthful good looks.

"I grew up around a lot of older women as a girl in the country," Debbi answers, responding to the question of how she prepared to play a seventy-five-year-old woman. "I knew how they spoke, how they walked, the dignity that they have." Aside from that, she allows, there was really very little time to research the part, as "I didn't know I would be playing Elizabeth's whole life when the filming started. They just kept feeding me the script as I went along. Actually," she recalls, "playing the old woman was a lot easier than the middle-aged period. To be forty-five you can't depend nearly as much on makeup and stylized movements." The casting decision apparently was as spontaneous and instinctive as Debbi's grasp of the character.

Stan Margulies, producer of both the original *Roots* epic and *Roots II* remarked: "In doing this project we were faced with a variety of characters who would age; not all these parts were central, yet certainly much of our casting search entailed finding actors who would age well. The part of Elizabeth is a vital one to the story, with the most important periods of her life being at a young age, 17 and 18. Her biggest impact was as a young woman. Debbi was far and away the best actress who read for the role, she is a hell of a performer, and when we discovered how well she adjusted physically to becoming an older person, it was an added bonus we never expected."

The network powers-that-be have pinned heady hopes on Debbi resulting in this auspicious and, by all accounts, plum assignment, as well as a development deal with Warner Bros. Television for a pilot and possible series. Very few young actresses inspire such generous confidence.

A former protégée of the Negro Ensemble Company and the New Federal Theatre workshop, Debbi has logged a respectable number of hours in numerous Off-Broadway productions, including the Joseph Papp staging of *What the Wineseller Buys*, which wound up on Broadway and later as a roadshow with Debbi in the lead role. Other credits include a bit part in the exploitation extravaganza *Mandingo* and a starring spot in something called *The Monkey Hustle*, an abortive attempt to ride the *Coolie High* bandwagon. A bit of TV work followed a move from New York to Los Angeles, but nothing in her career seems to have portended the truly complex demands and obvious creative rewards of playing Elizabeth in *Roots II*.

Although she admits a part like Elizabeth may come but once in an actress's career, Debbi sees in the character a certain sadness mixed with the woman's pride and purpose that gives the budding performer pause. "Elizabeth never marries, and the reasons behind that are really tragic. She was denied the chances in life she deserved, and although she was a strong and powerful figure in the family, there was a great deal missing from her life. I'd like a chance to play someone who has really lived, who hasn't been cheated by circumstances." Age qualifications certainly won't stand in her way.